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A VAGRANT TUNE

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BY

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'From a briar-grown garden that nobody knows,
Save one lone bird with a vagrant tune,
The dreamer gathers a last sad rose,
The ghost of a season that once was June.

'Pale are the blossoms that cluster here,
And lonesome the song of the mateless bird,
Yet linger and listen, O Sweet and Dear,
You shall catch of my soul the secret word.'

LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON
(in *The Garden of Dreams*)

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CHAPTER I

THE village of Diddlebury lies at the other end of nowhere — that is to say, a couple of miles or so off the main road which runs from the market town of Little Frippon to the Cathedral city of Purchester and thence to the coast.

No one, unless he is a resident or has some business to transact in the village, ever ventures to turn off the highway on to the loop lane which eventually, after pursuing a leisurely way up hill and down dale, merges into 'the street,' as the natives call it, and issuing again out of the hamlet rejoins the Purchester road a considerable distance from the spot where it left it. Very occasionally a stray pedestrian or motorist finds himself in the village by accident, but when that happens the inhabitants view him with such suspicion that he is quite relieved to get out of the place with all possible speed.

Just before the houses begin there is another

road running off at right angles, but that only leads up to the Heath, and is chiefly used by those who, whether for amatory or ambulatory reasons, wish to reach that salubrious spot, and it dies an early death among some farm buildings just beyond the open space where gorse and heather and harebells jostle one another in the crowd, and where the wild thyme makes a fragrant bed upon which to lie and listen to the larks quivering the air with beating wings and pouring out their ecstatic song, their grace for the blue sky and white clouds and all the maddening beauty of a world bathed in golden sunshine.

It was half-way up this hill leading to the Heath that Miss Lavender's cottage stood, separated from the road by a narrow strip of garden, gay for at least six months of the year with old-fashioned flowers, and with a gray flagged path running up to the front door, between the worn stones of which yellow stonecrop and purple aubretia and soft green moss insisted upon growing. Miss Lavender loved these uninvited plants almost as much as she did the gillyflowers and

verbenas and hollyhocks resting sedately on their beds of warm brown soil on either side, but Euphemia never saw them poking out their perky little heads year after year without exclaiming aloud. When she had been younger and better able to stoop, she had made, periodically, onslaughts upon them with a broken kitchen fork kept for that express purpose; but they had only, as it were, jeered at her for her pains and come up the following spring in greater profusion than ever, until at last, sooner than acknowledge defeat, she had made the excuse of rheumatics and left them to work their wicked will unmolested, to Miss Lavender's secret joy and her own unconcealed annoyance.

Euphemia was Miss Lavender's domestic, and had been so for so long that the two had insensibly drifted into a relationship far closer than that usually existing between mistress and maid. For something like forty years she had served Miss Lavender with such complete singleness of purpose, that service had become the pivot upon which everything else turned, and her

mistress the one person in the world who mattered. Side by side the two of them had passed through the various phases of life, had faced sorrow and happiness, hope and disappointment; side by side they had watched the years slip away, adding here a wrinkle, there a gray hair; and side by side they now stood on the shadowy western slope with the brow of the hill at their backs, and the valley, through which they each must journey alone, lying wrapt in the mists of evening at their feet.

A few people—those who could not understand that love breaks through all barriers, even those social ones set up by man — were apt to consider that Miss Lavender allowed her old servant a great deal too much freedom of speech and was altogether on too familiar terms with her; but then they looked at the matter from their own standpoint and tried to imagine their little Mauds and Emilys demanding to know whether they had changed their damp boots directly they came in, and if not why not, and naturally the picture was beyond them. The

particular Maud or Emily who presumed to lecture her mistress on the folly of sitting in wet shoes would inevitably have left at the end of her month, and it was outside their powers of reasoning to grasp the fact that Euphemia was something quite apart from the ordinary 'general.'

Miss Lavender's house was, like its owner, small and neat and clean as a new pin. The dining-room, on the left of the front door as you entered, had only one window looking out towards the road across the strip of garden, and behind it, separated by a narrow passage, was the kitchen. The drawing-room was the other side of the hall and staircase, a long narrow room with a window at one end corresponding to that in the dining-room and at the other a glass door which led out into a small enclosure, half garden, half orchard, surrounded by a high red brick wall, so mellowed by time that it was almost the colour of the roses which climbed up it and nodded over the top to the stolid cattle in the meadow beyond, which cattle, since roses are not

good for food, remained callously indifferent to their charms, much as an alderman at a city banquet remains indifferent to the charms of the ladies in the balcony who watch him eat.

In one corner of this wall, close up against the house, was a door opening out on to a by-lane, but it was so many years since it had been used that it was doubtful whether it would still swing on its hinges, even if it had not been locked and the key lost. This door, nevertheless, was a source of much uneasiness to Euphemia, who had a rooted conviction, which nothing served to eradicate, that ' some fine day ' a tramp would discover this means of ingress and, proceeding to batter it down, would burst in upon Miss Lavender in the drawing-room and compel her, at the point of the pistol, to hand over her purse and the few simple articles of jewellery which she wore. She had insisted upon planting a row of hollies across the recess in which the door stood, in order to make his entry as unpleasant as possible, and she contemplated the havoc that would be wrought upon his garments, not to

mention his person, with a kind of melancholy satisfaction, but that anything would keep him out when he *did* come she steadily refused to believe for a single instant. Miss Lavender had once tentatively suggested the advisability of keeping a dog as a means of protection, but Euphemia had opposed the scheme on the grounds that a dog included fleas, and that, on the whole, the uncertain burglar was a lesser evil than the certain flea.

Miss Lavender's other name was Mottram, but nobody in the village ever dreamt of calling her by it, and had it not been for her infrequent correspondence she might almost have forgotten it herself. As for Euphemia, she presumably *had* a surname once upon a time, but what it had been was a secret locked up in her own bosom, and she was quite content to be known as 'Miss Lavender's Euphemia.'

Diddlebury held her in high esteem as one who could, when occasion required, use the rough side of her tongue, and he was a brave fellow among the tradesmen who dared venture

to cross swords with her, for she called a spade a spade without any regard whatever for the feelings of that humble implement, and even Mrs. Bowers, the rector's wife, who considered it her mission in life to regulate the affairs of the whole parish down to the smallest details, hesitated before bearding her in her den!

Towards Miss Lavender her attitude was a queer mixture of humility and self-assertiveness. She never thought twice about speaking out her mind freely when her mistress did anything which she considered might be derogatory to her dignity or injurious to her health, but woe betide anybody else who presumed to criticise! Home-truths fell about their shoulders like hailstones, and they were left with no illusions as to their own characters. A lioness defending her cubs was not fiercer than Euphemia defending Miss Lavender against her critics!

It is a curious but undeniable fact that the less eventful life is, the more swiftly does time move, and such was certainly the case with these two living their quiet existence in the small house on

the hill. One day told another, and one night certified another with so little to mark the difference, that the most trivial deviation from the ordinary routine of life, which in most households would have passed unnoticed, seemed to them events of soul-stirring importance.

There had, of course, been happenings of local interest, apart from purely personal ones, to excite the village and rouse it to a state of vivacity almost bordering on frenzy, such as, for instance, that never-to-be-forgotten occasion when the west gallery of the church collapsed in the middle of the rector's sermon, narrowly escaping killing the sexton who was slumbering peacefully behind one of its wooden pillars, and who was extricated from the ruins unhurt, but more dead than alive with terror, being firmly convinced, despite assurances to the contrary, that it was the end of the world. A good many people, at the time, thought that it had something to do with the choir having been put into cassocks and surplices, but, as the sexton justly remarked, it was rather hard that he should be the one singled

out for retribution even if his wife *did* do the church washing.

Diddlebury is very loyal, and waves flags on Empire Day with great gusto, but the Throne is one of the few institutions it shares in common with the outside world. Battle, murder, or sudden death moves half a continent to wonder, horror, or grief, as the case may be, and Diddlebury remains callously indifferent, though the demise of the carrier's horse will stir it to its very foundations.

New ideas gain ground but slowly in the little out-of-the-way hamlet; in fact it might almost be said that what Diddlebury thinks to-day, England thought the day before yesterday, and the stranger in the place who cannot satisfactorily explain his presence is viewed with just suspicion. The rising generation accept the telegraph as an acknowledged fact simply because they have been brought up to it, but there are still those among the older inhabitants who shake their heads over the innovation and lay to its charge every thunderstorm which visits the district, while telephones they regard as some-

thing to be religiously avoided by all who value the welfare of their souls. What would happen if by any chance an airman happened to descend in their midst is too terrible to contemplate, since a motor-cyclist very nearly caused the death of old Mrs. Smith, who was standing at her garden gate when he came by at the rate of some forty miles an hour, she being firmly convinced that he was a visitant from another world, and that not a better one! In time, no doubt, telephones and electric light and 'company's water' will find their way to Diddlebury, but with their advent something of the sturdy independence of the place will be taken away, and, instead of standing alone, it will become a mere appendage to Little Frippon. Already the cloud no bigger than a man's hand has arisen in the shape of a proposal, emanating from some of the more adventurous spirits among the younger inhabitants, to introduce a system of drainage into the village, but Diddlebury, as a whole, is strongly averse to burying its individuality in a sewer, and long may it continue to be so!

CHAPTER II

BEHIND Miss Lavender's cottage, on the further side of the meadow beyond the red brick wall, stood a large, gray, stone house known as Starr Cross. Once upon a time, but so long ago that only those who were grown up could recollect it, a large noisy family of boys and girls had inhabited it, but one by one they had gone out into the world, and the father and mother had died, and, somehow or other, nobody had come to take their place, so that for years the house had remained empty and desolate, the glass broken in the window-panes, the doors rotted on their hinges, while in the garden the trees and bushes, with no one to cut them back, had grown together into a thick tangle of branches meeting across what had once been paths, completely obliterating them, and even encroaching upon the drive itself, so that, before long, any one wishing

to reach the front door would have to cut a way through like the prince in *Sleeping Beauty*.

It had never been rightly explained how it ever happened that the house had been allowed to get into such a state of decay, but it was popularly supposed that, the owner of the property having died abroad, his heirs had lacked either the means or the energy to put it into order, and, after vainly endeavouring for some years to sell it, had simply given up the attempt, and left it to fall to pieces of its own accord.

Hardly to be wondered at was it that the house had gained the reputation of being haunted, or that there was nobody in the village who would willingly have gone by it after dark. There was, luckily, no need to do this last thing, as Starr Cross stood well away by itself, and the sole approach to it was down the by-lane which led past the gate into Miss Lavender's back garden, that gate which Euphemia had so carefully fortified against invaders.

Miss Lavender herself always felt a sneaking dread of what she might see from the staircase

window on her way up to bed, especially on bright moonlight nights, and, if the blind happened to have been left undrawn, hurried by with averted eyes, while Euphemia, whose bedroom looked right across the meadow to the shrubbery, was frankly and avowedly terrified lest the ghost should some time elect to leave its own precincts and, wandering afield, make its way in her direction. Now and then, in a sudden access of panic, she would get out of bed and arrange straws crosswise on the sill lest it should take it into its head to climb in at her window, but she was slightly ashamed of, and never confessed to, this weakness.

It was Mrs. Brill who first brought the news that Starr Cross was actually taken.

Mrs. Brill, or 'that there Caroline' as she was contemptuously designated by Euphemia, was the lady whose services were requisitioned at those times of domestic upheaval which involved any additional labour, such as the annual Spring-clean, and the rare occasions upon which Miss Lavender, like Hans Breitmann, gave a party.

She also 'obliged' one day a week by coming in to do some of the rough work, an obligation which put four shillings into her pocket each Saturday evening, and, incidentally, a nice little sum into the till of the bar-parlour of the 'Unicorn,' Mr. Brill never failing to exact a substantial toll out of his wife's earnings.

Mr. Brill was by way of posing as a carpenter, but, as Caroline very truly observed, it was only by ' fits and starts' that he pursued his legitimate calling, preferring to spend his time at the one public-house of which the village boasted, airing his views as to the superiority of the British workman, and apostrophising those who were sensible enough to remain on good terms with their employers as 'beggarly parasites,' a term of opprobrium of the meaning of which he was entirely ignorant, though it shocked his wife, who had an idea that it had something to do with murdering your father. She knew better however, poor soul, than to expostulate with him on the subject, for he did not carry his theories of the equality of all men into his home life,

and was rather apt to 'form 'asty judgments,' as she put it, which resolved itself into brute force being employed if she ventured to hold an opposite opinion to her lord and master.

Euphemia never knew which of the two to pity most, and was quite unable to decide in her own mind which of them was cause, and which effect, though she was slightly inclined to believe that Caroline was enough to drive anybody to drink.

' 'Alf an hour of 'er nearly sends me mad, so what it must be to find yourself tied up to 'er for life don't bear thinking of,' she observed once to Miss Lavender.

'But he needn't have married her in the first instance,' Miss Lavender pointed out with some show of reason.

'That's not for us to say 'oo didn't know 'er mother,' Euphemia said darkly. 'I'll never believe, for one, that Caroline went off without a good strong push from be'ind, and from all accounts 'er mother 'ad the knack of bringing a man to see reason, leastways she managed to get three 'usbands for 'erself.'

The days on which Euphemia was forced not only to do her own work but to superintend that of Caroline were always a sore trial to her. She was glad to be spared the arduous task of scrubbing floors, but it galled her nevertheless to watch her understudy's slow movements, and she was fond of comparing her own methods with those of the unfortunate Mrs. Brill, to the great disadvantage of the latter.

The floors *she* had scrubbed you could have eaten your dinner off afterwards, had you been minded so to do, but in these days a lick and a promise seemed all that was thought necessary, and as for moving out the dresser and cleaning behind it, well, she'd be sorry to look there and see the dirt there must be! One of these fine days she'd go down on her knees, rheumatics or no rheumatics, and just show Caroline how it ought to be done.

Another thing which exasperated Euphemia was the habit Mrs. Brill had of keeping up a continual steady flow of conversation, never adhering to one subject for more than a few

seconds at a time, so that it required a series of mental leaps and bounds to follow her. She flitted among the various bits of gossip she had picked up during the week, like a bumble-bee among flowers, bridging the gulf which separated them with ruminations of her own, expecting neither question nor comment, though humbly grateful if her listener displayed the slightest interest in what she was talking about.

It was during one of these discursive rambles that she imparted the information about Starr Cross already mentioned, and, as usual, she had begun far away from the topic.

'I 'ear the comic 's coming to England,' she had remarked from underneath the kitchen table, where she happened to be at the moment, engaged in washing that bit of the floor.

''Oo 's 'e ?' inquired Euphemia, addressing her through the intervening woodwork without enthusiasm.

'It's not an 'e, it's one o' them stars with a tail shooting 'ither and thither in the 'eavens as the fancy takes it,' explained Caroline.

'A comet, you mean,' corrected Euphemia. 'I thought, for the minute, you meant one o' them black monarchs.'

'Well, any'ow, I 'ope it won't do any damage,' Caroline said doubtfully.

'Why should it ? ' queried Euphemia.

'You never seem to know where you are with them 'eavenly bodies,' was the reply in a somewhat less muffled voice, Caroline having emerged on the other side of the table by this time.

'A railway train, now,' she continued meditatively, ' 'as its own appointed limits to keep, unless there's an accident, and even then it don't do more than run down an embankment or fall off a bridge, underneath which no person in their senses would choose for to stand, not without it was a tramp, tramps using sech places to sleep in. A comic, on the other 'and, not 'aving fixed lines on which to run, ain't any more responsible for its goings on than an omblibus without a driver, and if it takes it into its 'ead to fly in through your bedroom winder there's no one to gainsay it, so far as I can see.'

'There was a comet when I was a gal, but as far as I remember it just 'ung from the sky by its tail and did no 'arm,' recollected Euphemia.

'But this 'ere one's made up with laughing-gas,' said Caroline a trifle anxiously. 'According to a gentleman 'oo stargazes in Paris, it'll make us all die o' laughing, which sounds to me 'ardly respectable, though, to be sure, what might befall anybody at the dentist's 'aving a tooth pulled out by gas.

'I don't 'old with prophesiers, though,' she went on after a pause. 'What I sez is if anything unpleasant 'as got to 'appen, the less we knows about it before'and the better. It must be dreadful seeing all the 'orrible things that are going to 'appen, and not be able so much as to lift a finger to stop 'em, like that Old Moore, 'ooever 'e may be. The rector come in to pay a procul visit on me, a while back, and see'd the almanac lying on the table, and 'e was quite put out about it. Vain supposition 'e called it, but if you asked me I should say liver 'ad something to do with it, for no man living could look so

persistent on the black side of things without their inside was out o' order. I 'aven't spent fifteen years married to Brill without 'aving to suffer many things along o' 'is liver. Once that gets wrong *everything's* wrong, and do what one may, one can't please 'im, 'e 's that full o' crotchets and quavers. I declare to goodness that if it wasn't for the thought of the 'arps I'd almost be glad to go.'

'If it wasn't for *what* 'arps ?' asked Euphemia irritably.

'The 'arps I should 'ave to play in 'eaven,' explained Caroline. 'I've always 'ad a distaste for string instruments ever since an uncle o' mine took lessons on the banjo. They seem to make my 'ead twang.' For a few seconds she scrubbed on in silence, then a sudden thought seemed to strike her, for she sat back on her heels, after depositing her various implements on the floor, and gazed out of the window with a far-away look in her eye.

'There's always the 'ope, of course, that Brill may be took first,' she observed rather more

cheerfully. 'Not that wild 'orses 'ud drag me to the halter again if I 'ad the good fortune to be left a widder to-morrow; but there, I never was one o' the lucky ones like mother.'

'Three times, wasn't it?' inquired Euphemia with a sudden display of interest.

Caroline nodded complacently.

'But I was all the family she ever 'ad,' she said. 'She felt that.'

'She would!' Euphemia said decidedly.

'Ah yes, she did. "You ain't much to show for three 'usbands," many and many's the time I've 'eard 'er say, when she was a bit put out like. I was never brought up to think too much o' my looks as some is.'

'Which per'aps was just as well,' remarked Euphemia caustically. 'Life's full o' disappointments as it is without 'aving them thrust upon us by others.'

'You might well say so if you was married,' Caroline said despondently, resuming her work with a deep sigh. 'For if ever there was a disappointment in this world it's Brill. Not but

what I 'ope I know my duty towards 'im,' she added hastily. 'It sez in the Bible that the 'usband shall rule over 'is wife, though o' course that was said about Adam, and 'e being an Asiatic would naturally expect to keep 'is wife in objection, as they do to this day, or so I've 'eard tell, shutting 'em up in 'arems and never letting 'em see another man, much less speak to one, and 'owever they do their shopping it beats me to think. I'm sure I'm not surprised they've started banana missions for the poor creatures.'

' 'Ow you do rattle on, to be sure,' said Euphemia impatiently. 'It makes me tired to listen to you, what with your 'arems and 'arps and stars and what not.'

'And that reminds me, 'ave you 'eard that Starr Cross is took ? ' asked Caroline.

The reception of this item of information was more than even Mrs. Brill had dared hope for. Euphemia dropped the basin she happened to be holding in her hands at the time with a loud crash on to the floor at her feet, where it lay shivered into a thousand atoms, while she her-

self sat down abruptly in the nearest chair, clasping her heart with both hands.

'Never!' she exclaimed in tones of utter incredulity.

'It's as true as I stand 'ere,' declared Caroline, suiting the action to the words with the aid of the kitchen table.

'I don't believe it. 'Oo told you?' Euphemia demanded to know.

'The very words I used meself when first I 'eard of it,' observed Caroline, gratified beyond measure at the other's display of incredulous amazement. ' 'Ooever's been fool enough to want to go and live in that benighted 'ole? I sez, which is 'aunted by a ghost, let alone the roof lets in water by the gallon.'

' 'Oo told you?' demanded Euphemia once more, this time with evident suspicion.

Caroline thus adjured settled down to a recital of her tale with obvious relish.

' I went into Frippon yesterday by the carrier to sell a few eggs, and, my business being done and 'aving 'alf an hour to spare, I thought I'd

jest walk along to Mercer's and 'ave a look in their winder in case I might get an 'int as to 'ow to do up my winter 'at for Easter, and I 'adn't 'ardly turned the corner into Middle Street when 'oo should I see but Mr. Bates the builder, and the minute 'e notices me 'e gives me an 'ail. "Lucky meeting you like this," 'e says; "I was meaning to run out to Diddlebury on my bike one o' these afternoons and find out if your 'usband was busy jest at present." "I dessay 'e could fit in any little job you 'ad for 'im, Mr. Bates," I sez, (for I wasn't going to let on that Brill wasn't doing anything). "Whereabouts might it be ? " I sez. "Why, where but in your own parish, Mrs. Brill," 'e sez; " 'aven't you 'eard that Starr Cross is took ? " Well, I was that flabbergasted that I never answered 'im a word, but stood there on the pathway opening and shutting my mouth with no sound coming out.'

' Not a minute ago you told me you said you didn't believe it,' interrupted Euphemia severely, who was beginning to recover from the first

shock of the news, and to realise that Caroline was adopting a quite unwarrantable air of superiority which required rigorous suppression before it grew to greater dimensions.

'And so I did directly I could find the words,' Caroline said. ''Ooever *'as* been fool enough I sez——'

'And 'oo 'as?' cut in Euphemia.

'Ever 'eard of Tidd?' asked Caroline.

Euphemia thought for a minute, then shook her head.

'The name sounds familiar enough, but I can't lay 'ands on where I've come across it,' she said. ''Oo's Tidd ? '

'Why, the patient medicine man, o' course,' announced Caroline triumphantly.

'Not the Cure-All,' gasped Euphemia.

'That's the very one,' said Caroline. 'Though what 'e wants with Starr Cross beats me.'

Euphemia laughed hysterically.

''E's going to build a pill factory,' she declared unhesitatingly. 'My poor Miss Lavender 'ull be driven out of 'ouse and 'ome by a lot o'

nasty belching chimneys covering the 'ole place with smuts and dirt.'

'Like 'Agar,' suggested Caroline, to whom the picture forcibly appealed.

'For goodness' sake don't be more foolish than 'eaven made you,' snapped Euphemia, who was in no mood to be trifled with. 'If you was to attend to washing the floor properly instead of gossiping on about rubbish we shouldn't 'ave these upsets.'

'Well, there now,' said the aggrieved Caroline, stung by the injustice of the charge to defend herself. 'You can't 'old me responsible for what others may do, and a nice thing if Miss Lavender 'ad 'eard the news in the village without 'aving 'ad due warning. It *would* 'ave given 'er a turn.'

'I'd better go and tell 'er at once, before the rumour reaches 'er,' Euphemia said flurriedly, almost as though she expected the report to make its way up from the village unaided and burst in upon her mistress in the dining-room, unless steps were instantly taken to prevent such a catastrophe.

Miss Lavender was engaged upon the uncongenial task of adding up the weekly books when Euphemia interrupted her.

'Whatever *is* the matter, Euphemia?' she inquired in some trepidation, noticing the other's set expression.

Euphemia shook a gloomy head.

'Matter enough,' she replied forebodingly. 'Starr Cross is took.'

'Starr Cross taken!' exclaimed Miss Lavender, hardly believing her ears. 'Are you *positive,* Euphemia?'

'Caroline told me for certain, not five minutes since; but that ain't the worst.'

'It isn't—they aren't going to start a private asylum there?' Miss Lavender asked, clutching the arms of her chair in an agony of despair.

'Worse,' was Euphemia's terse reply.

'Oh, Euphemia, whatever could be worse! For mercy's sake tell me quickly what it is,' besought Miss Lavender in trembling tones.

'Well then, they're going to make *pills* there,' Euphemia said with due solemnity.

Miss Lavender drew herself up stiffly.

'*Pills,*' she echoed incredulously. 'I never heard of such a thing. I shall write and protest to the authorities.'

'What authorities ?' inquired Euphemia.

'The—the inspector of public nuisances,' answered Miss Lavender desperately.

CHAPTER III

LUCKILY for Euphemia's peace of mind, it was not long before she discovered that the 'pill-factory' existed only in her own fevered imagination, and that Mr. Tidd, the proprietor of the famous 'Cure-All,' who already possessed extensive works on the outskirts of London, had no intention whatever of adding to his responsibilities by building fresh ones in a remote country district, but, on the contrary, had bought Starr Cross as a place to retire to in his declining years, leaving the business in the hands of a capable manager.

'Though what maggot 'e 'ad in 'is brain to induce 'im to go and buy a ramshackle old barn like that, when there's 'ouses and to spare with doors and winders to 'em, not to mention roofs to cover 'em, is past my understanding. You mark my words, there's something be'ind it all,' quoth Euphemia, waxing eloquent.

'It's a very nice house, at least it used to be in Mr. Evershed's time. Why shouldn't he want to buy it ?' Miss Lavender said a little sharply, resenting the implied slight on it.

'Yes, but 'e's not even been down to see it, so 'ow can 'e tell whether it's nice or no? Folks don't buy pigs in pokes without some good reason, not without they're born fools. There's something be'ind it all,' insisted Euphemia, who took the deepest interest in everything that concerned Starr Cross and its new occupants, and who seldom returned from her walks abroad without having gleaned some items of information about one or the other to regale her mistress with.

Miss Lavender, it must be confessed, was quite as eager to listen as Euphemia was to relate, though she did think it her duty occasionally to feign indifference, and the sight of a workman passing the cottage with a pot of paint was sufficient to send her flying to the window, unless the old servant was in the room.

These same workmen were a source of much

perturbation to Euphemia, since nearly all of them were strangers to the place, and she took the precaution of purchasing a length of barbed wire to supplement the row of hollies across the door leading out into the lane down which they had to go to reach their work.

'They'll leave something be'ind to identify 'em by if they *do* come,' she remarked, surveying her handiwork with satisfaction.

'Yes, but think how much more desperate they'll be if they've hurt themselves getting in. Besides, they may bleed on to the drawing-room carpet,' objected Miss Lavender, who viewed these preparations for the reception of possible disturbers of the peace with considerable misgiving. She never pretended to be anything but an arrant coward, and Euphemia always sternly refused to tell her where she hid the silver each night, so that ignorance of its whereabouts might be quite truthfully pleaded in case of emergency.

'There's only 'imself and one son,' Euphemia announced one morning on her return from the village, whither she had been ostensibly to buy

butter. (It was wonderful in these days how often orders were forgotten to be given to the boot-boy when he left, for delivery at the shop.) 'The son's at Oxford College.'

Miss Lavender did not need to ask to whom she referred.

'Did you hear anything about Mrs. Tidd?' she inquired with interest, the feminine portion of the family being that likely to concern her most.

Euphemia shook her head.

'It's a funny thing, but not once 'ave I 'eard 'er mentioned, nor 'as any one else. There's some reason for it, you may be sure. I 'ope it's not 'er 'oo's be'ind it all. I can't 'elp the feeling that it's something in connection with 'er that they've come to settle in such a far-off spot.'

'What nonsense, Euphemia,' said Miss Lavender quite crossly. 'What reason could there possibly be why Mrs. Tidd should want to live here more than anywhere else?'

'I didn't say she *wanted* to,' Euphemia said

darkly. 'It may be the rest of 'er family 'oo want to 'ide 'er from view.'

'Whatever do you mean?' asked Miss Lavender.

'Well, it's not for me to say, Miss, but drink, or disease, or brain-mischief 'ud any of 'em be reason enough, to my way o' thinking, to make 'em wishful not to 'ave too many neighbours round.'

That the good lady had, for the last twenty years been the solitary occupant of an excessively hideous and correspondingly expensive tomb at Kendal Green was too obvious an explanation to be entertained by either of them for one single instant. Their imaginations, jaded with the excitements of the past few weeks, refused any such simple solution of the silence which reigned supreme as far as Mrs. Tidd was concerned. From that moment, until the one in which the commonplace truth was forced upon their notice, they never spoke of her except with bated breath as one above whose head there hung the shadow of a fear, though what cast the

shadow they could not determine to their satisfaction. Miss Lavender, because her greatest terror was mad people, was perfectly convinced that the unfortunate lady was a victim to periodical attacks of mania, probably homicidal, while Euphemia inclined to the theory that drink was at the bottom of the trouble. Both agreed that bottle glass round the top of the garden wall was desirable, if not actually necessary.

The day after the workmen were out of Starr Cross, which was not until well on in May, Miss Lavender suddenly announced her intention of going round there to see what alterations had been made.

'You can come too, if you like,' she said graciously to Euphemia.

It was during lunch that she made known her decision, and Euphemia, who was handing the vegetables at the moment, nearly dropped the potatoes in her surprise. In spite of its close proximity her mistress had not once entered the gates of Starr Cross since it had been left empty more than twenty years ago.

'A deserted house is one of the saddest things on earth, especially to those who have known it under different circumstances. Don't ever ask me to go there,' she had said on one occasion when Euphemia had suggested that she might sometimes use the garden to sit out in. That was before the ghost had put in an appearance, or the suggestion would never have been made! Even now, though the sun was shining brightly, Euphemia looked a little dubious at the idea of risking an encounter with it, but curiosity at length got the better of her fears, and she decided to accept the invitation.

'We'll start early so as not to be too late back,' she said. 'I'll run along directly I've swallowed my dinner, and fetch the key from Caroline.'

'What is Caroline doing with the key ?' asked Miss Lavender.

'She's to do the cleaning up after the workmen,' explained Euphemia. 'And a job I 'ad to persuade 'er to accept the offer. Thinks the ghost'll eat 'er, I shouldn't wonder.' She laughed

the easy laugh of one who scoffs at danger, deliberately forgetting her hesitation of a few moments since.

'Poor Caroline,' said Miss Lavender, with a guilty remembrance of those occasions when she herself had hurried past the staircase window with averted head, on her way to bed, for fear of what she might see if she looked out across the moonlit meadows in the direction of the unkempt shrubbery with its deep mysterious shadows and tangled undergrowth.

'I shall start at three, then,' said Miss Lavender as she got up from the table at the end of the meal.

'I'll be ready,' Euphemia responded.

It was with strangely mixed feelings that Miss Lavender found herself opening the gate through which she had passed so many times in bygone days. Everything looked so exactly the same as it had been, that it left her with an odd sensation of having *dreamed* the intervening years, and she had to glance surreptitiously at Euphemia, who walked at her side, to convince herself that she

really was an elderly woman, and not the girl who had spent so many happy hours in that very garden.

'Twenty years *is* a long time, for all it goes so quick,' Euphemia suddenly said, as though answering the unspoken thought which had flashed through her mind.

'It's twice twenty-five years since I used to play here as a child,' said Miss Lavender a little wistfully. 'I wonder what has become of all the others? I've quite lost sight of them all, even Mary Evershed who used to be such a friend of mine.'

'What a one she was for tricks and mischief,' Euphemia said pensively. 'Always wishing she'd been born a boy! She was for ever leading you into all kinds of trouble.'

Miss Lavender shook an almost regretful head.

'I was generally much too frightened to do the things she used to,' she said. 'Do you remember how angry Mrs. Evershed was with her for climbing that oak tree in the upper meadow?'

'And 'ow she used to run races with those young fellows Mr. Evershed 'ad down from London for an 'oliday one summer,' continued Euphemia, taking up the tale. 'It was 'er Pa put 'is foot down there, and quite rightly too, in my opinion, for when all's said and done they were only what you might call common young men, shop assistants and the like, respectful and well be'aved though they may 'ave been, and it wasn't 'ardly suitable for a young lady to demean 'erself to 'em. I always wondered at Mr. Evershed asking 'em down, I must say, but 'e was a kind gentleman and looked to make others 'appy when 'e 'ad the chance. But for 'im, I daresay, those lads wouldn't ever 'ave got a breath of good country air inside their lungs, for that was before the days when everybody 'as their fortnight at the seaside, be they what they may. The grand gentlemen 'oo serve be'ind the counter nowadays 'ud be insulted at being put to sleep in a loft over the stables, like they was, but they seemed 'appy enough, and grateful into the bargain. I lay there's many of them 'as pleas-

ant recollections of this place, if only one knew what 'ad become of 'em.'

'On fevered beds where sick men toss,' quoted Miss Lavender, so softly that the words were barely audible.

'Eh ?' said Euphemia, who had not caught them.

Miss Lavender roused herself with a little start.

'Perhaps some of them died abroad, far away from those they loved, of fever or some other dreadful disease. If so, I should think that must have been the sort of time when one's memory would turn back with an almost desperate longing to this peaceful garden, with its cool shade and quiet,' she said, getting rather pink, as she realised that sentiments were being forced out of her lips which usually she would have kept locked up in her breast.

They walked on in silence for a few yards until a bend in the drive brought them in view of the house, and at sight of it Miss Lavender stopped short.

'It's very extraordinary,' she said.

'What is?' asked Euphemia, stopping perforce also.

'It's precisely the same as it was in the Eversheds' time,' said Miss Lavender, resuming her progress, but continuing to stare at the house in front of them with an air of bewilderment.

'Why shouldn't it be the same?' demanded Euphemia in matter-of-fact tones.

'Well, you'd have thought there would have been *some* alteration, *some* improvement, but nothing is altered in the very least. Even the paint is the same ugly buff colour it used to be, and they've got the same four lozenge-shaped beds on the lawn opposite the front door. It almost looks as if——'

'As if what?' asked Euphemia, as Miss Lavender paused.

'As if it was done on purpose. As if they *wanted* it to look the same.'

'Whatever should they want that for?'

'I don't know, unless—unless it has been done by somebody who knew and loved it in old

days. Euphemia, who *is* Mr. Tidd? ' said Miss Lavender solemnly.

It was at this moment that the sound of a motor horn fell upon their startled ears, and the next second, to their dismay, they distinctly heard a car come down the lane and pull up at the very gate through which they had so lately passed.

' I don't know 'oo 'e is, but *'ere* 'e is,' said Euphemia hysterically.

Miss Lavender threw a haunted glance around. Not three feet off, on the grass at the edge of the drive, was a thick laurel bush. Without a word she seized the astonished Euphemia by the wrist and, dragging her violently behind, scurried under cover in the very nick of time to balk discovery, for, even as they cowered down on the ground, the car swept round the bend which had mercifully hidden them from view, and gliding up to the front door, deposited its solitary passenger on the steps, a short, rather rotund gentleman in a heavy overcoat, and wearing a thick woolen muffler pulled high up to protect his throat and mouth.

'That 'e should 'ave chosen this day to come, of all others,' said Euphemia palpitatingly when they found themselves once more safely outside the gate, at which they had arrived by a devious route, skulking behind bushes, and pushing their way through undergrowth, with an utter disregard of either convenience or dignity.

'It's a mercy we weren't actually in the house,' gasped Miss Lavender, trying to arrange her disordered garments with shaking fingers.

Euphemia gave a little shriek of dismay at the words.

'Whatever is it, Euphemia?' demanded Miss Lavender irritably.

'We've got the front door key,' was the reply in sepulchral tones.

CHAPTER IV

It took Miss Lavender some little time to recover from her hasty and undignified exodus from Starr Cross, though she was slightly consoled by the discovery that, after all, the key which had been borrowed from Caroline was that of the back door, and not the front, so that she was no longer haunted by visions of Mr. Tidd wandering round his own house, unable to effect an entrance, since, it appeared, he had motored down from town, calling at the agent's in Little Frippon on the way for the front door key, which was in that gentleman's possession.

He had not even penetrated into the village *en route,* so that nobody could give a satisfactory account of what he looked like, and Miss Lavender and Euphemia had been much too agitated to pay attention to anything but escaping without being seen, consequently they would

have been unable, apart from their disinclination to mention that rather disastrous episode, to give any description of him to the various people who expressed curiosity on the point.

The Tidds took up their abode in the middle of June, after a week of delirious excitement for Diddlebury, the entire population of which turned out *en masse* on the arrival of each fresh vanload of furniture, as many as could spare the time accompanying it as far as the gate of Starr Cross, to watch it with eager eyes lumbering up the drive, some even lingering, after it had turned the bend and was lost to view, to listen to the scrunch of the heavy wheels on the gravel, though what pleasure was to be derived from that it would be hard to explain.

The servants were brought over from Frippon, in a couple of hired motors, a day in advance of their master; there were six of them altogether, four women and two men, the latter causing quite a mild flutter, for it was forty-five years since there had been anything of the sort in Diddlebury, and then it had only been a male

attendant for the rector-of-the-time's brother who was slightly deficient. It was generally felt that their presence would revolutionise Diddlebury society, and Miss Perkins, the butcher's daughter, went so far as to order a new blouse from the Little Frippon Emporium, with an eye to the subjugation of the butler, who, as it afterwards turned out when too late to countermand it, was a married man with four children, whose wife and family were to join him as soon as the lodge was ready for occupation.

If the domestics were not the rose they were at any rate near it, and their advent created quite a furore on a small scale.

Euphemia, who watched their almost royal progress from behind the dining-room curtains, took in every detail of their appearances at a glance which embraced everything, from the bracelet which the upper housemaid wore 'above her station' to the emaciation of the footman who 'wanted looking after careful, else he'd go off in a gallop,' and duly reported to her mistress, whose pride forbade her to spy upon

the new-comers, although it required all her strength of will-power to resist.

To the intense disappointment of the whole village, the Tidds arrived late at night, when most people had gone to bed, so that it was just as well that Mrs. Bowers' suggestion of a triumphal arch, with 'Diddlebury greets you' written across it in red flannel letters on a white calico ground, had come to nothing.

'Let 'er speak for 'erself,' Euphemia had said, with considerable indignation, on first hearing of the proposition. 'We'd better find out what 'e's like before we're so ready to welcome 'im.'

The Sunday following their arrival there was a record congregation at church in the morning, but the only person to put in an appearance from Starr Cross was the kitchenmaid, who could hardly be said to be representative of the family.

Euphemia considered this, coupled with the late hour of their original arrival, to be fresh proof of her theory that Mrs. Tidd was labouring under some disability of body or mind, and was inclined to assume an aggressive air of 'I told

you so' which was only effectually quenched by the direct testimony of the cook (who had been in Mr. Tidd's service at the time), regarding the lady's decease of long standing, as supplied to Mrs. Critchett at the 'Stores.'

'It makes it very awkward about calling,' Miss Lavender said anxiously, on learning of the absence of any lady at the head of the establishment. 'I shouldn't like to do anything which might turn out to be incorrect, and yet, at the same time, I should be sorry to appear unfriendly, especially as they are such close neighbours. I've really almost a mind to consult the rector. He's a clergyman, you see, so he's used to being shocked, and I could rely on his discretion not to let it go further that I was ignorant of the proper course to pursue.'

'There's that book all about 'ow to be'ave when you ain't sure,' Euphemia suggested with a sudden inspiration. 'You might find something in that. It's in the spare room shelves. I'll fetch it.'

She departed on her errand, and presently re-

appeared with a dingy brown volume which she handed to her mistress.

'There you are,' she said.

'Wherever did it come from?' remarked Miss Lavender, surveying the book with disfavour. 'I don't ever remember seeing it before.'

'You got it at old Mr. Crowe's sale, along with a cookery book and one or two more,' said Euphemia.

Miss Lavender consulted the chapter headings in the index doubtfully. 'Etiquette in calling, page 290,' she read out; then, turning to the place indicated, '"A lady never calls on a gentleman unless professionally or officially. It is not only ill-bred, but positively improper to do so." That settles it,' she said, closing the book, and feeling quite hot and uncomfortable at the idea of having contemplated, even for a second, an act of such glaring impropriety. 'Perhaps after all it's just as well. I don't know that I could ever have felt quite at ease in the house of a man who mixes medicines.'

'But Dr. Cruickshank does 'is own dispensing,

and you call on Mrs. Cruickshank,' objected Euphemia.

'Yes, but somehow a patent medicine seems worse than other kinds. I don't know I'm sure why it should be so, but it is. Dr. Cruickshank, you see, makes up a medicine to suit a particular case, while, with a patent medicine, the cases seem to suit themselves to *it*. It's the same sort of difference as between having tea with a friend and having it in a tea-shop. I can't explain, but I know what I mean,' said Miss Lavender flounderingly.

'It's a good thing somebody does, for I don't,' said Euphemia severely.

For some mysterious reason she seemed a trifle annoyed at Miss Lavender's decision not to call, and presently it came out.

'Young Mr. Tidd rode by 'ere on 'orseback while I was doing the front this morning before breakfast. A nicer looking young gentleman you couldn't wish for to see, and pleasant spoken too,' she remarked.

In an instant Miss Lavender was all agog.

'Euphemia! You never told me,' she said reproachfully. 'Do you actually mean to tell me you *spoke* to him?'

'We didn't 'ave many words,' Euphemia replied, a note of regret in her voice. 'I daresay I looked at 'im a bit 'ard, as you might say, for as 'e drew up alongside 'e smiled quite friendly, and touched 'is cap with the 'andle of 'is whip, and "The early birds 'as the best of it these beautiful mornings," 'e says, just as if 'e'd known me all 'is life, and I couldn't but 'elp smile back for very joy of 'im, 'e looked so 'appy.'

She paused and gave a little sigh.

'It must be wonderful to 'ave a son you can be proud of like 'im,' she added reflectively.

'But I don't see what all this has got to do with whether I call upon Mr. Tidd or not,' said Miss Lavender in some bewilderment.

'No, I suppose it ain't, only I did 'ope we should see 'im 'ere now and then—the young one I mean,' said Euphemia. 'Of course though, one wouldn't wish to make folks talk, and if the gentleman in the book says it ain't the

thing, we must just abide by 'is decision, that's all.'

'We've got on very nicely for the last thirty years and more without young men coming to the house. I fail to understand why you should have this sudden desire to see one here,' Miss Lavender observed, with a touch of asperity in her voice.

'We've put up with it,' retorted Euphemia. 'What can't be cured must be endured.'

Miss Lavender drew herself up stiffly.

'Really, Euphemia!' she protested.

'Oh, what's the good of pretending,' Euphemia said, growing reckless under reproof. 'There ain't a woman worth the name 'oo 'asn't got the longing to mother something, and if she ain't got children to spend it on she just casts about to find something instead, a cat, maybe, or a parrot, or one o' them nasty, fat, wheezing pug-dogs, if she ain't lucky enough to 'ave any men-folk, which is best of all, for when you come to think, what are men but grown children? Look 'ow 'elpless they are without a woman to

see after 'em and sew on their buttons, and cosset 'em when they're sick, and kiss 'em when they fall down and bruise their poor little knees on the 'ard road.'

She paused and laughed a little constrainedly before she went on:

'I may 'ave missed marrying and 'aving real flesh and blood children, but the children I've 'ad in make-believe! Many's the time when I've been alone in the kitchen doing my work that I've 'ad 'em in my mind, until I almost seemed to see 'em round me.'

Once more she paused, a far-away look in her dim eyes, and a tender smile hovering at the corner of her lips, as though, even now, she saw before her the forms her imagination had conjured up.

'It sounds silly, I know,' she continued in a little while, 'but when that lad smiled at me so friendly this morning, it seemed, all of a sudden, as if 'e might be one o' my dream children grown up and come to life, and I felt so *proud* of 'im.'

She stopped, and swallowed down some emo-

tion in her throat which had risen up and threatened to break bounds. Miss Lavender laid her hand gently on the old servant's arm.

'I know,' she said softly. 'We're just two lonely old women, when all's said and done.'

'But we've got one another,' Euphemia said with desperate eagerness. 'You mustn't go thinking I'd 'ave things different. You mustn't think that, my dear.' Miss Lavender patted her arm reassuringly.

'No, no, I don't think that,' she said consolingly. 'We've jogged along together for too many years to be able to spare one another easily, even if a miracle should happen.'

She debated for an instant, then, as if she had come to a definite conclusion, picked up the etiquette book which lay at her elbow, and trotting across the room dropped it into the wastepaper basket.

'The man who wrote that book is a mere mole, living in a conventional burrow. Euphemia,' she said resolutely, 'I shall call at Starr Cross to-morrow."

CHAPTER V

Miss Lavender was not destined to carry her bold design into execution. That very afternoon, as she sat quietly in the drawing-room knitting, the front door bell rang, causing her to stuff her work hastily into the bag which hung down at the back of the sofa, and to hurry to the glass over the mantelpiece in order to give a few ineffectual dabs to her hair, to settle the black velvet bow which concealed its shortcomings more firmly on her head.

She was still at the fireplace when the door opened, and Euphemia, red in the face with suppressed excitement, ushered in what, at first sight, looked like a crowd of men, led by Mrs. Bowers, the rectoress, a modern Joan of Arc, though she waved a reticule instead of a sword.

The crowd of men presently resolved itself into three, the rector and — sufficient reason

for Euphemia's hardly-contained emotions—the new tenant of Starr Cross and his son.

Miss Lavender stood there staring stupidly, while Euphemia announced the visitors in a voice which, despite her endeavours, shook a little, and only recovered the use of her faculties when Mrs. Bowers ran at her with a purr of delighted surprise, as if the mistress of the house were the very last person she had expected to see.

'How *too* delicious, you dear thing,' she exclaimed effusively, clasping Miss Lavender in a warm embrace. 'I've been meaning to come and see you for *days,* but somehow something always turned up to prevent it — well, *you* know how busy I am. I'm sure, as I often say to the RECTOR, I get *no* time for my own affairs, and I could do with twenty-six hours in the day.' Mrs. Bowers always spoke of her husband in capital letters outside the rectory, although in private life she treated him as if he were nothing more important than a footnote to the story of her own life.

'Could you really,' said Miss Lavender, feel-

ing the futility of the remark but unable to think of another.

'But now that I *have* found a minute in which to pop in upon you, I have not come alone,' went on Mrs. Bowers; 'I've brought a new neighbour but an old friend to visit you.'

'An old friend?' queried Miss Lavender, gazing helplessly at the rector to see if he could enlighten her, but as he only nodded back and smiled vacantly, she turned once more to his wife for information.

'An old friend?' she repeated again.

'Mr. Tidd,' said the rectoress quite sharply. And at the words Miss Lavender's heart stood still while you could count three, as she afterwards told Euphemia, for she had no doubt in her own mind that they had been seen that afternoon when they had cowered behind the laurel bush in the Starr Cross drive, and that Mrs. Bowers was being funny at her expense. At this last thought, pride came to her rescue.

'I saw Mr. Tidd pass in his motor when he paid a visit to Starr Cross one day last month,

but otherwise I don't think I have had the pleasure of meeting him,' she said, with a little bow in his direction. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Oh, much longer ago than that,' said Mrs. Bowers impatiently. 'You were boy and girl together, or something of that sort. Mr. Tidd was telling me all about it at lunch, only I couldn't understand, except that I know he was most anxious for me to bring him to call, and now you deny having ever seen him before, and I'd made up quite a romance, and now you're going to spoil it. It's *too* bad. I insist on your having a good look at him before you knock down my castle.' With which she stepped aside and, brushing the rector out of the line of vision, left an embarrassed elderly gentleman face to face with a still more embarrassed elderly lady, each struck dumb with exactly the same agony of shyness which seizes upon two miserable children who have been commanded by their parents or nurses to 'kiss and make friends,' while conscious that all the time they are being watched.

Mr. Tidd was the first to recover himself.

'It's so long ago,' he said. 'So many years ago. I was only a lad at the time.'

'I suppose — it's very rude of me to have forgotten, but I'm afraid I must confess to it,' Miss Lavender said apologetically. 'I'm — I'm so stupid about remembering people, though of course we don't have so very many strangers in Diddlebury that that is an adequate excuse. Perhaps you used to stay with Mr. Crowe. I know he sometimes had visitors.' She was so obviously distressed at her failure to recognise Mr. Tidd that he hastened to reassure her.

'Now you mustn't think anything more about it,' he said soothingly. 'It isn't to be expected you would remember me. I was only one of a crowd, and you probably never even noticed me.' He stopped, and his lips twitched. 'Though we *did* rob an apple orchard together.'

Instantly into Miss Lavender's brain flashed the picture of a hitherto well-nigh forgotten episode of her youth. She saw herself, an incongruous figure in a short skirt of tartan, beneath

which peeped out the white frills of certain nether garments in accordance with the ridiculous custom of those otherwise modest days, wringing her hands at the foot of an apple tree in Farmer Child's orchard, the tears coursing down her craven cheeks as she implored her two companions, a boy and a girl, to leave their forbidden fruit and escape before the farmer, whom she espied in the next field, discovered them and inflicted summary justice. She saw the two faces, the boy's compassionate, the girl's contemptuous, peering down through the branches, and she heard the girl's voice saying 'Little coward' in tones of scorn, but she also remembered, even now with a thrill of gratitude, how the boy had slid to the ground, and asking her not to cry had handed her a rather dirty handkerchief with which to dry her eyes, after which they had run side by side to the safer ground of the Starr Cross shrubbery, pursued by the derisive laughter of the girl left alone among the apple boughs. The girl had been Mary Evershed, and the boy one of those whom Mr. Ever-

shed had brought down from the London raff to spend a few weeks in the country, away from the toil and turmoil of the city, that summer so many years ago.

Was it possible that this dapper little gentleman with the well-cut clothes and the gray side-whiskers was the same person as her champion of those youthful days? She remembered that he had been rather a grubby boy, and that he had been called 'Jimmy' by the others, but as for any other name, he might have had none for all she had known to the contrary. If it was so, it was true what Euphemia had said about some of those lads keeping green the memory of those halcyon days, for here was an example in front of her very eyes. Here was one to whom they had been so precious that, when fortune smiled upon him, he had turned gratefully back to the spot around which clustered such happy memories, rescuing it from oblivion in order that he might pass the remainder of his life among the scenes where he had first learned that the world is not entirely composed of mean streets and

crowded thoroughfares, but has better gifts to offer her sons in the shape of flowers and trees, and birds and green fields, and pure air and sunshine, though it is only the fortunate few to whom the chance of profiting by these gifts is given.

'Is it really you?' Miss Lavender managed to gasp out, as the truth forced itself upon her.

'Yes. It's I,' he responded gravely; then added with a whimsical smile, 'A lot of water has run under the bridges since then, eh? I was nothing but a young urchin in those days, and now I've got a young urchin of my own.'

He turned, as he spoke, with a gesture of unmistakable pride to his son, who stood just behind him.

'My boy, Ma'am,' he said.

Miss Lavender came forward and shook hands, regarding him with frank curiosity.

'We're quiet people here. You'll find it dull among us,' she said.

He laughed back, a boyish, unaffected laugh, and at the sound of it Miss Lavender began

dimly to understand and sympathise with Euphemia's mood of the morning. It *was* nice to feel young life about one.

'It depends upon oneself whether one's dull or not, not on other people,' he said cheerfully. 'Besides, I've heard so much about Diddlebury from my earliest infancy that it only seems like coming home to come here.'

'Now if that isn't a neatly turned compliment,' put in Mrs. Bowers, who considered that she and the rector were being left rather out in the cold. 'Your father must have *specially* pleasant recollections of the little place to have remained faithful to its memory for such a long, *long* time.'

'And so I have,' said Mr. Tidd senior sturdily. 'When I came here as a lad, never mind how long ago, I was just earning a few shillings a week by running errands and cleaning out the shop for a chemist in one of the poorer parts of London. That was before the days of these fresh-air funds and so forth, when poor people had to be content with what they had in the way

of surroundings. It'll sound strange to you maybe, but I was nearly seventeen when I came down here, and until then I'd never set eyes on the country. It was like a foretaste of heaven to a miserable little guttersnipe like me, and many was the night I cried myself to sleep after I got back to my corner of a crowded bedroom in Poplar, longing for another sight of this place. But it did one thing for me which nothing else could have done. It made me determined to get on in the world, so that some day I could come back. I set to work to educate myself. I went to night schools; I studied chemistry; I pestered my master with questions about drugs and their uses, until at last he began to take an interest in me, and I discovered I was worth something better than to sweep floors and wash bottles. He used to let me watch him mixing medicines. With his help I qualified as a chemist, worked my way up to being his partner, invented my "Cure-All" as I call it, and—and here I am,' he concluded lamely, suddenly becoming aware that he had let his tongue run away with him.

'So nice,' murmured the rector, feeling that he ought to contribute his share towards the conversation, but a trifle vague as to what it was all about.

'Quite like Dick Whittington,' remarked Mrs. Bowers, who always sought for analogies in the events of everyday life.

'Only the other way round,' observed Bobbie. 'Pity that Tidd is a name which doesn't give self-respecting bells a chance. Did you hear the Diddlebury bells peal, "Turn again Tidd, chairman of the Diddlebury parish council," Dad, as you left?'

'Alas, we are not fortunate enough to possess a peal of bells,' said the rector, who always took everything literally, and lacked the sense of humour. 'Although we have a belfry,' he added with indecent haste, and one eye on Mr. Tidd's pocket, as though he half expected that gentleman to put his hand into it and produce the requisite sum for the purchase of church bells then and there.

The entrance of the tea-tray made a welcome diversion.

'You remember Euphemia?' said Miss Lavender. At which, forgetting everything else in the astonishment of the moment, Euphemia stood stock still in the middle of the room staring.

Mr. Tidd bowed as if he were being presented to a duchess.

'I remember Euphemia perfectly,' he said. 'She may not recall the incident, but the last time I had the privilege of meeting her, she boxed my ears.'

'What for?' asked Mrs. Bowers suspiciously, while the tray sloped to a dangerous angle.

'For throwing stones at a cat, if my memory serves,' Mr. Tidd informed her, to which the sole response was a sniff — one of those sniffs which are so much more eloquent than mere words!

'Mind the tea things, Euphemia,' cried Miss Lavender in an agony, noticing the angle of the tray and momentarily expecting to see her best Crown Derby cups and saucers smashed to bits on the carpet.

Euphemia set the tray down on the table, then resumed her staring.

'You ain't never the same?' she said incredulously.

'As far as the wrong side of sixty can be the same as the right side of twenty, I am,' Mr. Tidd assured her.

'Well, there now!' exclaimed Euphemia. 'When I think of the little ragamuffin of them days, and look at you now, I can 'ardly believe it.'

'Euphemia!' expostulated Miss Lavender.

With an obvious effort Euphemia withdrew her gaze from Mr. Tidd and turned it upon her mistress.

'Is it the truth?' she inquired of her.

'Of course, Euphemia,' said Miss Lavender, a trifle shocked at her handmaiden's continued disbelief. 'Mr. Tidd has told you.'

'To think of it!' A gratified smile spread itself slowly over her face. 'I wasn't so far out, you see,' she said triumphantly.

'What about?' asked Miss Lavender.

'About some of 'em being grateful. 'Ere's one, at any rate.' She indicated Mr. Tidd with a gesture of the head. 'Fancy remembering that

box on the ears all this time. Well, I reckon it wasn't wasted, there's that to be said about it.'

'Indeed it wasn't,' said Mr. Tidd solemnly, albeit with a twinkle in his eye. 'It is one of my most grateful memories.'

'Such a character,' remarked Mrs. Bowers with empressement, when the door had finally shut on Euphemia's broad back. 'Euphemia always reminds me of faithful Henry.'

But as nobody at the moment could recollect who Faithful Henry was, the observation fell rather flat, the only person to respond being the rector, who murmured, 'Very apt; very apt indeed,' and then hastily rose to hand tea-cups, lest haply he might be called upon to substantiate the aptitude of his wife's comparison.

CHAPTER VI

THE discovery of Mr. Tidd's identity had been something in the nature of a shock to Miss Lavender. She felt as if her youth had suddenly risen out of the grave in which she had long ago decently interred it, to confront her, a ghostly, pallid youth, with all its former joy in life done away with, and only the mockery of what she once had been remaining.

It is difficult enough to credit the passage of time in ourselves, but in those whom we have lost sight of for years, it is almost impossible to realise the alteration which those years have wrought, and we resent it as something unnatural and contrary to what we have the right to expect. Six o'clock on a fine evening in June is, perhaps, one of the best times in the whole year, but, like all really beautiful things, there can be a tinge of melancholy about it if one is in a receptive mood for depression, as Miss Lavender was this particular evening, and no

doubt the hour completed the feeling of dejection which the sight of Mr. Tidd's gray whiskers had begun.

Those who are lucky enough to be able to look back upon many a 'crowded hour of glorious life' cannot fully appreciate the tragedy of a life which has been denied the opportunities of expansion; a life which, if it has never known the bitterness of great suffering, has likewise never experienced the thrill of great joy — for it *is* a tragedy to have reached the age of fulfilment only to find oneself with empty hands and a heart devoid of hope.

The last occasion upon which these two had met, the highway of the world had lain before them, stretching out into unknown possibilities, and, to Miss Lavender at least, the way had proved barren of incident, a dead, monotonous level along which to trudge, without ever a bend in the road to relieve the tedium, or a hill to climb, down which she might look back and feel the glow of satisfaction at a difficulty surmounted.

Euphemia, coming in to clear away the tea things after the departure of the guests, found her mistress still sitting at the table, hands folded in her lap, gazing out into the garden where the lengthening shadows were beginning to creep across the lawn. A tiny breeze had sprung up, gently stirring the tops of the elms which bordered the lane on the other side of the wall, while from the shrubbery beyond the meadow the flutelike notes of a blackbird could be heard, saying grace for the day that was drawing to a close.

'Well, if that don't beat everything,' exclaimed Euphemia, who had evidently not yet recovered from the excitements of the afternoon.

Miss Lavender roused herself with a start.

'He's very much altered,' she said, pursuing her own train of thought.

'What do you expect? It's forty-four years come August since we set eyes on 'im. Time 'asn't stood still with 'im any more than it 'as with us,' observed Euphemia.

Miss Lavender gave a little sigh of regret.

'Have I changed as much as he has, Euphemia?' she asked wistfully.

Euphemia surveyed her critically.

'It's 'ard to say when you've lived with a person,' she replied. 'Your 'air of course 'as dinged a bit, and there ain't so much of it, but then, on the other 'and, you 'aven't grown whiskers, which is a pull in your favour. No, I shouldn't say, take it all round, you'd changed as much as 'im.'

Miss Lavender got up from her seat with a gesture of impatience.

'I *have* changed. I've changed as much as he has. I'm an old woman, as he's an old man, only he's something to show for his life, and I've nothing — nothing,' she said, throwing out her arms wide, as though to prove her words and display the emptiness.

Euphemia stared at her in amazement, almost terrified by this unwonted outburst.

'Why, my dear,' she said wonderingly, 'whatever's amiss?'

With an effort Miss Lavender recovered herself.

'Did you think I'd gone mad?' she said with a little shamefaced laugh. 'It was only I — forgot myself.'

'And did you forget me too?' asked Euphemia, turning away lest Miss Lavender should catch sight of the pain in her face at the knowledge that all the years of faithful service and unwavering loyalty counted for nothing when measured against what might have been. All the love, all the devotion of which she was capable, she had stored up in her heart, to lay at the feet of this beloved mistress, only to learn that it had not even sufficed to fill up one corner of the empty inner room in her life.

Perhaps Miss Lavender guessed something of the thoughts which were weighing down the old woman's spirit, for she went across to where she stood and, taking hold of her by both shoulders, gave her a little shake first, then gently kissed her on the cheek.

'You're as great an old fool as I am,' she said. 'How do you suppose I should get along without you to look after me, and scold

me, and cosset me, and set me to rights when I'm wrong. Don't go getting silly ideas into your head, just because I lost mine for a minute.'

Euphemia winked back the tears which had risen in her eyes.

'I can't bear for you to fret,' she said, resting her hand for a second on Miss Lavender's. 'I don't ask anything back so long as you're happy. That's what matters, when all's said and done. There! I 'aven't time to stand talking 'ere, else I won't get these things washed before it's time to set the dinner.'

Picking up the tray, she vanished from the room, and Miss Lavender, getting her knitting, settled herself down on the sofa, determined not to indulge in any more gloomy reflections, or to worry herself about a state of affairs which it was beyond her power to alter.

It was Euphemia who reopened the subject of Mr. Tidd.

'Sech a little slubber-degullion as 'e used to be,' she remarked as she placed the soup

tureen in front of her mistress at dinner that same evening.

'Who used?' inquired Miss Lavender, somewhat startled at this sudden and candid criticism about some unknown person.

'Why, that Tidd,' rejoined Euphemia. 'Jimmy 'e was called in them days, if I remember right, and now I suppose I shall 'ave to call 'im "Sir."'

'Shall you mind?' asked Miss Lavender, seeing possible breakers ahead.

'I don't know as I shall exactly *mind*, only it comes queer from me to 'im,' replied Euphemia thoughtfully. 'From what I can recollect, I usedn't to set much store by them boys.'

'But, Euphemia, don't you think it splendid that he should have made himself what he is?' said Miss Lavender. 'The more you despised him as a boy, the more reason you have to admire him now.'

'I don't know that it was 'im more than the others, but I dessay I'll admire 'im right enough

if you'll give me time to collect myself. At present, I don't seem to 'ave sorted 'im out. To think of 'im remembering that box on the ears I give 'im, all these years.'

Euphemia smiled as at some pleasurable recollection.

'I'm glad I did it now,' she remarked.

'Why?' asked Miss Lavender, rather puzzled.

Euphemia considered for a moment.

'I can't 'ardly say why,' she said at length. 'Unless it is it gives me a sort of right to take an interest in that boy of 'is. I reckon boxing a man's ears is much the same as kissing 'im. 'E stands out from among the others.'

'Euphemia!' protested Miss Lavender, her sense of propriety outraged by the unblushing candour of this speech.

'Well, ain't it true?' demanded Euphemia

'I — I don't know. I — I've had very little to do with men. I never boxed the ears of one in my life, and I most certainly never did the—the other thing,' said Miss Lavender stiffly.

'More did I. The other thing, I mean, but I expect I ain't far wrong,' declared Euphemia.

'I know nothing at all about it. You can take away the soup,' said Miss Lavneder, effectually closing the discussion.

CHAPTER VII

It was almost inevitable, under the circumstances that a certain intimacy should spring up between the two households so near to one another, and gradually it grew to be the custom for Mr. Tidd and his son to be continually popping into Miss Lavender's, either to consult her upon some domestic affair, or to present her with a bunch of greenhouse flowers, or else to ask her opinion about something which they felt unequal to dealing with unaided. A man without female belongings always appeals to the motherhood lying dormant in every true woman's heart, and by degrees not only Miss Lavender, but Euphemia also, took it upon themselves to exercise a certain amount of supervision over them in such matters which cry aloud for feminine interference, such as the changing of wet boots and the not sitting about in damp clothes, and the avoidance of draughts when one was hot.

'I never knew a man wanted so much looking after,' Miss Lavender said a little wistfully one day, when Mr. Tidd had called in to say that he did not feel at all well and should not be surprised if he was discovered to be suffering from some mortal complaint. 'It was nothing in the world but his liver out of order, I'm sure.'

'Did you tell 'im so?' inquired Euphemia, to whom this confidence was made.

Miss Lavender blushed.

'Oh no. I couldn't have done that,' she replied.

'Why couldn't you?' pursued Euphemia.

'Oh, because—because it wouldn't have been the thing,' answered Miss Lavender, at bay.

'The thing!' rejoined Euphemia scornfully. 'I declare I 'aven't patience with folk 'oo make out nobody's got an inside except themselves.'

'There are things one doesn't talk about,' said Miss Lavender primly.

'Then one ought, when occasion arises, that's my opinion,' remarked Euphemia decidedly. 'There's a time to speak just the same as there's

a time to keep silent. You wait till 'e next rings that front door bell. I'll 'ave something to say to 'im about 'is inside, whether it's the thing, or whether it ain't, I promise you.'

'He's got his own medicine. Why don't you leave him to cure himself?' asked Miss Lavender, in a faint-hearted endeavour to stay Euphemia's hand.

''E knows better than to dose 'imself with 'is own stuff, I'll lay,' was the contemptuous reply; and after that, Miss Lavender gave up the unequal contest and left her neighbour to his fate.

Bobbie did not pay quite as many visits to the cottage as his father, and, when the hunting season commenced, was only rarely to be seen, but to make up for his absence Mr. Tidd came more frequently and stayed longer, until Miss Lavender began to regard a call from him as part of the day's programme, and felt, if by any chance he failed to turn up, as though the routine of life had been thrown out of gear.

When she allowed herself to think, which was not often, she could not help a sensation of

wonder overcoming her at the comparison of past with present.

She belonged to an age which regarded a self-made man as an anomaly; an age which carefully differentiated between class and class, and in which the game of Tom Tiddler's ground was a strictly nursery pastime. In her youth, if a man belonged to what people were pleased to call the lower orders, it was no easy matter for him to force his way into Society. His latchkey might be a golden one, but what was the use of that when doors were bolted and barred against all those who had not at least one grandfather behind them?

If Miss Lavender had been accustomed to the vagaries of latter-day society she would have known that class distinctions are very nearly as extinct as the dodo, and that to be on intimate terms with a successful vender of patent medicines is to be reckoned among the lucky ones of the earth. Laugh at him as much as you like behind his back, but don't let any contempt you may feel for him jeopardise your chances of get-

ting yours, or rather *his* money's worth. Charity still covers a multitude of sins, but to be effective it must be gold-plated. It is more showy that way.

Miss Lavender could not be regarded as a member of the high aristocracy, but she was of sufficiently good family (and sufficiently behind the times) to wonder what her parents would have said if they could have seen her receiving, on terms of equality, one who was unquestionably her inferior by birth. That he had educated himself to a degree which was remarkable, when you took into consideration his early upbringing, would not, she knew, have weighed with them in the least, and now and then, as she sat opposite to him in her little drawing-room, pouring out tea or listening to some tale of domestic woe, her conscience pricked her for ever having admitted him to anything beyond the merest acquaintanceship, though the next minute that same troublesome conscience would round upon her and upbraid her for want of charity. That Mr. Tidd showed signs of his humble origin there

was no denying, but they were all outward and visible ones, and his heart was in the right place, if his aitches were not, and what, after all, do the rules of grammar matter as long as the rules of life are observed? A gentleman by instinct is of more value than many gentlemen by position, and the former Mr. Tidd certainly was, although he did say 'ain't' instead of 'are not,' and talked about 'them days.' As time went on, Miss Lavender found it more and more difficult to reconcile his identity with that of the boy in the apple tree, and gradually the memory of that scene in the orchard, which had stood out so vividly in her recollection on her first re-meeting with him, grew to be something mythical and unreal, like a remembered dream of childhood.

With the shortening days, Mr. Tidd took to appearing with a book under his arm, from which he insisted upon reading aloud passages which had caught his fancy, and, as he read, Miss Lavender would sit watching him, trying to picture to herself the various phases of his

evolution. She had never hitherto had opportunity of studying her fellow-creatures, and she discovered it to be an engrossing pastime; indeed when the winter slipped by and warmer weather came, she found herself almost regretting its advent, for it must mean the ending of those pleasant odd half-hours spent beside the blazing hearth during which she had learnt, by quiet observation rather than by actual conversation, a great deal about her new neighbour which years of casual acquaintanceship could not have taught her.

She did not see quite so much of him as the days grew appreciably longer, for he liked to potter about his garden and, as he expressed it, 'watch the flowers wake up'; but Bobbie, on the other hand, now that hunting could not claim his time, appeared more frequently, to Euphemia's beaming satisfaction.

Here was a fresh study for Miss Lavender.

She had never before met, on terms of intimacy, a young man just down from the 'Varsity, and if he did sometimes take her breath away, he

compelled her to regard the world from an entirely new standpoint, and, without her being aware of it, did more to broaden her mind than any amount of solid reading of complex literature.

Her ideal young man, up to date, had combined the features of the Prince Consort with the attainments of a Senior Wrangler and the piety of an Archbishop, and Bobbie, who certainly did not come up to her standard in any of the foregoing requisites, upset all her preconceived notions, but nevertheless she felt strangely attracted to him.

His breezy entrance at unorthodox hours and into those parts of the house devoted solely to its conduct it was impossible to inveigh against, for he simply paid no regard to any remonstrances, and Euphemia, who hardly admitted a tradesman over the threshold of the back door, tamely submitted to his presence in the kitchen in the middle of the morning, and only feebly protested when he insisted on helping her to cook the dinner, as he occasionally did, and when, at

Easter, he went away to stay with an Oxford friend, the two in the cottage felt quite dull and lifeless without his periodical visits to look forward to.

It was the last week in April when he walked into the drawing-room, unannounced as usual. Miss Lavender had been washing the Crown Derby bowls which stood on the mantelpiece, and was putting them back when he came in at the open door, and she was quite surprised at the sudden thrill of pleasure which ran through her at sight of him.

'You're back then,' she said, putting the obvious into words, as nine people out of every ten do.

'Yes, I'm back,' replied Bobbie.

'And how did you enjoy your visit?' went on Miss Lavender.

'Oh, all right, thanks.'

The answer was so curt that Miss Lavender could not help looking at him a little curiously. It was unlike him to be sparing of words.

He evidently noticed the look, for he shuffled

his feet and added hastily, 'I had quite a good time.'

It was on the tip of Miss Lavender's tongue to say, 'Well you don't look as if you had,' but she refrained, and instead substituted the words, 'But you're glad to be back, I daresay ? '

' One's always glad to come home,' Bobbie said.

' You—you don't find it dull ? ' essayed Miss Lavender, trying to grope her way into the boy's confidence. That he had come with the intention of confiding in her was pretty certain, only he did not seem to know exactly how to begin.

' I love it,' Bobbie answered with a flash of enthusiasm, which died out almost immediately. ' The question is——'

' Well?' queried Miss Lavender eagerly.

' How would it strike other people ? '

' What *do* you mean ? '

' We're—different to them. Oh yes, we are.' (As she would have protested) 'D'you suppose I haven't had to face that fact times without number? We're neither fish, flesh, nor fowl.'

" But you're very good red herring,' said Miss Lavender quaintly, and, in spite of himself, Bobbie could not help bursting out into a peal of laughter.

' You do buck a chap up,' he said.

' But I can't see why you want "bucking up," as you call it,' she said anxiously. 'You're just the same person as you were when you went away.'

' Am I ? ' he said. 'Is anybody ever the same person for a fortnight together ? '

' Indeed I hope so,' said Miss Lavender quite indignantly. 'I've been the same person for the last forty years.'

Bobbie shook his head.

' You think you have, but you haven't,' he remarked. 'And what's more, you never will be as long as time endures. Each man, woman, or child you meet, every word you utter, every thought that comes into your brain, leaves you different to what you were before. By Jove, it's enough to give one the jumps to think of it !'

Miss Lavender smiled involuntarily. The

boyish conclusion sounded so contradictory to the sober, middle-aged reflections that had gone before.

'Oh, you can laugh,' he said, noticing the smile. 'But it's true for all that.' He went to the window as he spoke, and stood there, with his back to the room, swinging the blind-cord to and fro while he stared out into the garden.

Miss Lavender followed him and put her hand on his shoulder.

'Your father's so proud of you, Bobbie,' she said, and instantly wondered what had prompted her to do so, unless it was some subtle instinct which warned her that the two men, father and son, had arrived at a crisis in their hitherto unclouded relationship, such a crisis as too often arises when the boy first realises his manhood, and demands that others shall recognise it too. She had a foreboding, none the less disquieting because it was uncircumstantiated, that Bobbie was going to hurt his father in some way or another, and she resented it, though without knowing why. It was no business of hers

whether Mr. Tidd was disappointed in his son or not, but if she could prevent it she would.

She was on the point of pressing him for an explanation of this strange, unaccustomed mood of his when, to her intense annoyance, the front door bell rang, and the next minute a well-known voice could be heard asking whether she was at home.

'The Guv'nor,' exclaimed Bobbie.

Miss Lavender turned to greet the new-comer, and, even as she did so, her previous visitor slipped out through the window and disappeared round the corner.

'Had Bobbie here?' inquired Mr. Tidd when he had shaken hands.

'Yes. He's—he's just gone,' said Miss Lavender, speaking the strictest truth, yet feeling all the time as if she was telling a lie.

'Did 'e tell you 'e's got some of his fine friends coming to stay next week?' asked the old gentleman.

'No, he didn't,' replied Miss Lavender, beginning to smell a rat.

'Ah, he 'as though. He won't want the old gent then, will 'e ? '

'Indeed, I hope he will,' exclaimed Miss Lavender indignantly.

Mr. Tidd shook his head.

'No, no,' he said, 'there comes a time when the old folks have to make room for the young 'uns. That's 'ow the world wags, Miss Lavender, and we have to take things as we find 'em. Well, if I have to give my boy up I 'ope I'll do it with a good grace, though I'll miss 'im, there's no denying. 'E's meant a lot to me.'

A sudden light broke in upon Miss Lavender.

'Why do you talk of giving him up ? ' she asked. 'Is he engaged to be married ? '

'Not rightly engaged, as you might say, but keeping company, Miss Lavender, keeping company.'

Miss Lavender had heard the phrase applied to the lower classes, and could not refrain from commenting on it.

'Keeping company ! ' she repeated dubiously. 'But surely *we* don't keep company ? '

'Don't we, heh, don't we?' said the shrewd old man. 'What d'you call it then when a young man and woman are courting one another?'

'An—an understanding, I believe,' answered Miss Lavender hesitatingly.

'Then Bobbie and a certain young lady have an understanding, if you prefer the word, and, if I don't make a mistake, it's me who's the stumbling-block to its being something more.'

'Do you mean you disapprove?'

'Not me. If anybody disapproves it's the young lady's father. From what I can make out, he thinks me a common old fellow, and the rest of it. So I am, but if I'm ready to pay the piper and let him call the tune, I don't see what I matter to him or any one else. Suppose 'e thinks my blood ain't good enough to run in the veins of his grandchildren—that's about it.'

'These are the people, I conclude, that Bobbie has been staying with?' said Miss Lavender, beginning to grasp the situation. 'Who are they?'

'Chalmers, their name is. Young Chalmers

was at Oxford with my boy. That's where he met the sister. The father is brother to Sir Jacob Chalmers. He's a parson; not, I take it, because 'e 'ad leanings that way, but because the family living wanted filling, and they're the sort of folk who think the tenants on the estate 'aven't much chance of getting to 'eaven except by 'anging on to the coat-tails of one of 'em.'

Miss Lavender knew by the way aitches were flying that Mr. Tidd was labouring under strong emotion, although outwardly he preserved his calm.

'It's they who are coming here next week?' she asked.

Mr. Tidd nodded.

'I'm on appro.,' he said. 'A reversal of the usual order of things, ain't it?'

'Well, whatever you do, don't make yourself too cheap,' counselled Miss Lavender.

'Cheap!' exclaimed Mr. Tidd. 'That's a good 'un! I reckon I've got to make myself pretty expensive. You mustn't think I grudge it to my boy though, Miss Lavender. I don't want but

his 'appiness. He's been a good boy to me, bless 'im, and I won't stand in 'is way, so long as 'e *is* happy. I'll own it'll come a bit hard parting with 'im, but that's a thing that all parents have to put up with.'

'Why shouldn't they live here with you?' suggested Miss Lavender. 'Surely the house is large enough.'

But this proposition Mr. Tidd absolutely refused to listen to.

'No, no,' he said. 'That wouldn't be fair to Bobbie nor his wife. What would she be doing shut up in the country with an old dullard like me? Bobbie and his wife must start fair, same as I and my Missus did, though, thank God, I can afford to ensure 'em against the struggle *we* 'ad. Not that a bit of roughing it's bad for a young couple, when you come to think, for, after all, trouble's a great teacher, and when you've 'ad to fight every inch of the way, you learn to value the one who's stood shoulder to shoulder with you. Sometimes it strikes me a bit hard that she had all the rough and so little of the smooth,

but there! It's wonderful 'ow things pan out for the best, and if we don't see the reason of 'em in this world, I make no doubt we shall in the next. Well, well. Here we are talking as if Bobbie was married and done for, when he ain't even engaged.'

'No. And from what I can gather of the Chalmers family I sincerely trust he won't be,' said Miss Lavender quite viciously.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Tidd apparently made himself expensive enough to satisfy the demands even of Mr. Chalmers, for in less than a week from the date of her arrival at Starr Cross, Miss Marjorie Chalmers graciously consented, presumably in consideration of handsome settlements in prospect, to give her hand, if not her heart, to Bobbie, who, in the seventh heaven of delight, burst in upon Miss Lavender to tell her the wonderful news and suggest bringing his newly-acquired fiancée to tea in order that she might be able to assure him of his extraordinary good fortune, such as had been enjoyed by no young man hitherto, and the like of which no young man would ever enjoy through future ages. The egotism of youth in love is colossal, and its experiences unique ! ! !

All the rest of the morning Miss Lavender was in a flutter of excitement which she could not conceal, and which took the form of trotting

backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the drawing-room, with occasional side rushes to the storeroom to supplement Euphemia's already lavish preparations with some suddenly recollected dainty, until that harassed person was driven almost wild!

'Fancy Mr. Bobbie going to be married!' she kept on saying with such persistent reiteration that, at last, Euphemia was stung to reply:

'It don't need all that amount o' fancying, as I can see. It ain't as if we've known 'im long.'

'I suppose we haven't, as time goes,' agreed Miss Lavender unwillingly. 'But I feel as if we had,' she added more cheerfully.

'Feel as you like, but it don't alter the fact,' insisted Euphemia, laying down the law with aggravating deliberation.

'I've the greatest respect for Mr. Tidd,' declared Miss Lavender, faintly endeavouring to hold her own, but without avail.

'I've got a great respect for the King on 'is throne, but I'd 'ardly go so far as to say 'e was a friend o' mine.'

'You can't have friendship without respect,' Miss Lavender asserted, flourishing a pot of blackberry jelly in one hand.

'You can't 'ave a nose without a face, but you can 'ave a face without a nose,' observed Euphemia, calmly continuing to stone raisins.

'That's no argument,' said Miss Lavender shortly, retiring in disorder.

'You'll bring in the tea directly they come, Euphemia,' directed Miss Lavender, hovering round the tea-table as though she had a suspicion that the minute her eye was off it, it would deliberately set to work to disarrange itself. 'They won't be long now, I expect. It's a quarter-past four. You put a damp cloth over the savoury sandwiches? That's right. Remember to take it off before you bring them in. Perhaps you had better draw down the blind a little, and just put one small lump of coal on the fire, in case she finds the room chilly.'

'Nobody 'eard of a fire in May in my young days,' grumbled Euphemia as she proceeded to

carry out her mistress's orders. 'I don't know what folks are comin' to, what with wantin' to warm themselves beside the fire in the middle o' summer, and breakin' the ice in ponds to 'ave a bathe in the middle o' winter! If one was livin' in Australia, where everything's contrary to nature, one could understand it.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Miss Lavender severely. 'Nature is nature, all the world over.'

'D' you mean to tell me it's natural to eat your Christmas puddin' in weather so 'ot that as often as not you take it for a picnic, or that it's natural to 'ave your swans black, or to be walkin' about 'ead downwards?' demanded Euphemia.

'It's quite as natural to them as it is to us.'

'To walk about 'ead downwards! That you'll never make me believe.'

'Of course they don't walk about in any such ridiculous fashion,' said Miss Lavender, tapping her foot on the floor. 'I meant the black swans, and the pudding, and—and so on,' she ended up, lamely.

'Well, any'ow, it ain't natural to me to see a fire burning in the grate in the middle o' May, with the clean chintzes on the chairs and all. If you ain't careful, it'll mean another Spring-clean. It's nigh upon the half hour. I'd better be putting the kettle on to boil.'

'You got the cream from Mrs. Ricketts ?'

'It's in the larder to keep cool.'

'Then directly you've shown them in, you'll bring tea without my ringing ?'

'That'll be all right. Don't you start worryin',' said Euphemia reassuringly.

When she had gone out of the room, Miss Lavender took up her knitting, then laid it back again on the table.

'They'll be here any minute now; it isn't worth while to start another row.'

As a matter of fact there would have been time for many rows, for the minutes went by and they had not come, nor had they at the end of five minutes, nor ten, nor a quarter of an hour, and when the clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour there was still no sign of them.

Miss Lavender sat regarding the tea she had been at such trouble to prepare daintily, with rather a rueful countenance. It seemed that it was all going to be wasted.

At a quarter-past five Euphemia put her head in at the door, to know if her mistress would wait any longer or begin tea without her expected visitors.

'I suppose I had better not wait,' Miss Lavender said a little disappointedly. 'They aren't likely to be coming now.'

'Nice manners, I must say!' said Euphemia, setting down the tray with a bang which caused the cups to rattle in their saucers. 'I don't envy Mr. Bobbie, if that's 'er line.'

'If what's her line?' inquired Miss Lavender.

'Putting folks out for nothing, like this,' snapped Euphemia, who was smarting under the injury of having made a cake after a special recipe of her own which was reserved for high days and holidays.

And even as she spoke, the garden gate shut

with a clang, and footsteps and voices sounded coming up the flagged path to the front door.

'There they are,' said Miss Lavender excitedly. 'Go and let them in.'

'A nice hour to turn up! They'd better have stopped away altogether,' grumbled Euphemia, trundling off to do her mistress's bidding.

What sort of a girl she expected Marjorie Chalmers to be she hardly knew, but she was certainly not prepared for the ultra-fashionable damsel whom Euphemia presently ushered in, followed by Bobbie, smirking self-consciously at her very high heels.

'You will let me give you a cup of tea,' she said, when the ceremony of introduction was over and they were sitting down.

'Thanks. Just a tiny half,' drawled Miss Chalmers.

'Cream and sugar, my dear? I know young people like sweet things.' She smiled in friendly fashion at her guest, but there was no answering smile on Miss Chalmer's well-bred countenance. Rather, she looked at the simple little

lady opposite her as though she were a stuffed figure in a museum, labelled 'Specimen of Early Victorian Spinster, very rare.'

'Neither, thanks. Just a little lemon,' she said languidly.

Miss Lavender dropped the sugar-tongs, and peered at her helplessly over the top of her spectacles.

'Lemon!' she repeated vaguely. 'Did you say lemon?'

Miss Chalmers laughed, a half-sneering, half-patronising laugh.

'Never mind. On second thoughts, I don't think I'll have any tea.'

'Oh, but of course you must, my dear,' said Miss Lavender, recovering herself with an effort. 'If you don't mind waiting a few minutes you shall have your lemon. Will you ring the bell, please, Bobbie.'

'A little lemon, please,' she said when Euphemia appeared at the door.

'*Lemon,*' exclaimed Euphemia amazedly. 'Whatever do you want with lemon now?'

'Kindly do as I bid you,' said Miss Lavender sharply.

Euphemia withdrew, shutting the door behind her, but the next instant it opened a crack, and her head was thrust through the aperture.

'In a glass ?' she inquired.

Miss Lavender hesitated, and glanced at Bobbie for inspiration; but he was far too engrossed in gazing at his lady-love to notice her appeal, and it was Miss Chalmers who spoke.

'It really isn't worth all this fuss,' she said disdainfully. 'Pray don't put yourself out on my account.'

'But you must have some tea,' Miss Lavender said, to whom tea was not a meal, but a solemn rite.

Miss Chalmers, however, steadily declined, to her hostess's poignant distress, who felt that, in some way or another, she was responsible for the catastrophe.

'At least you'll have something to eat, some tea-cake, or a piece of bread and butter ?' she urged her guest, but Miss Chalmers was not to be cajoled.

'It's so late, we shall be dining soon,' was the sole reply, and the way she said it implied that Miss Lavender was to blame for the time.

The conversation languished on for a quarter of an hour, during which time Miss Lavender learnt that the young lady hated the country, pitied those whose fate it was to live anywhere else but in London, and only remembered the existence of her home when she wanted to squeeze money out of her long-suffering parent.

'It's rather a good thing Papa loathes me so, as he forks out at once, to get rid of me,' was the outspoken comment of this dutiful daughter.

'I'm sure you're joking, my dear,' said Miss Lavender, striving manfully to conceal the horror she felt at this statement.

'I never joke for the benefit of people who would probably not appreciate it,' said Miss Chalmers coldly, and the covert insolence of the remark made even Bobbie, who was in the blissful stage of thinking everything his fiancée said or did perfect, grow uncomfortably hot.

'We'd better be off. It's getting on for six,'

he reminded her, and Miss Lavender, for once in her life, sped the parting guest, and did not attempt to persuade them to stay on.

She watched them pass the window on their homeward way, from behind the curtain, until they were out of sight, then returned to the table and looked regretfully at the untouched dainties which she had been at such pains to prepare. It is humiliating to find that even the swine have disdained your pearls!

Euphemia, when she came in presently to take the tea things away, made no effort to hide her opinion of Miss Chalmers.

'A proud look and an 'igh stomach don't make for happiness, as Mr. Bobbie 'ull find to his cost,' she observed caustically, lumping the still piled-up plates on to a tray. 'I suppose oysters and champagne are more in her ladyship's style. She might at least have pretended, even if she didn't want.'

The following morning Mr. Tidd paid his first visit for more than a week, and Miss Lavender was quite startled at his appearance, he looked so ill and worried.

She was out in the garden gathering the daffodils which made bright patches of yellow in the cool green grass under the almond-trees, the blossom of which was already beginning to fall in showers of pink. Mr. Tidd sat heavily down on the wooden seat, and taking off his hat, put it beside him, then, producing a large red handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his forehead.

'You've seen 'er ?' he remarked after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, during which each waited for the other to speak first.

'Yes.' The monosyllable came out with a snap. Miss Lavender felt its utter inadequacy, but for the life of her she could think of nothing to round it off and make it seem a little less tell-tale.

'Well ?'

'She's very—fashionable.' As before, she would have given worlds to have been able to say more, but the words simply would not come, though she realised how damning the faint praise must sound. To her relief, however, the old

gentleman seized upon them as though they were a rope thrown to him in a troubled sea to pull him through the surf.

'That's it,' he said with tremulous eagerness. 'We can't judge them fashionable folk by ourselves. It's all pose with them. It ain't really their true characters ? '

The note of interrogation in his voice negatived all his efforts to make it sound an assertion, and Miss Lavender felt a fierce resentment rising within her against the girl who had sown even the tiniest seed of suspicion in his trusting nature. For more than twenty years he had set his boy in a niche in his heart, and worshipped him almost as an idol, and this creature had merely to beckon him with her little finger for him to follow, leaving the niche empty and desecrated. It was the story over again of the poor man and his ewe-lamb, that story which goes on continually, which, old as it is, is always new.

'They aren't married yet,' she found herself saying in consolatory tones, then stopped confusedly, remembering that he had not yet con-

fided in her, although she knew, as well as if he had told her in so many words, what was passing in his mind.

'But they will be,' he answered heavily. 'I don't know what's come over the boy, she's fair bewitched 'im.'

'You can stop it, if you like,' said Miss Lavender, and immediately hated herself for the suggestion.

'You mean I needn't give 'im the money?'

She kept silence.

'No, I couldn't do that. It 'ud break the boy's heart. I've got to put a good face on the matter; I've got to make up my mind to 'is going away from me, and I've got to make up my mind that when 'e's gone, 'e won't come back."

'Won't come back! What nonsense! Of course he'll come back,' said Miss Lavender with that forced cheerfulness which one uses with children and invalids, but old Mr. Tidd shook a mournful head.

'It won't be the same,' he insisted. ''E won't be *my boy* like 'e was before. For the matter of that, 'e ain't my boy now, same as 'e was.'

'How do you mean?'

'Mean? I mean she's taught 'im to be ashamed o' me, me, 'is father, who'd cut off my right hand if it 'ud do 'im any good.' His voice broke on the words, and Miss Lavender was terribly afraid, for a fraction of a second, that he was going to lose his self-control, which would have embarrassed her dreadfully; but he was made of too stern stuff for that, and after a pause went on speaking.

'One 'as eyes in the back of one's head, when one's trying not to see anything. I think I could 'a' borne anything but that.' He got up from where he sat and took a few steps towards her, then turned and went again to the seat, though he did not sit down, but stood there twisting his fingers nervously.

'Are you quite sure you are not mistaken?' asked Miss Lavender gently. 'I can't believe such a thing of Bobbie.'

'I wish to God I was, ma'am,' he said bitterly. 'I shouldn't mind 'er laughing at me behind my back. I'm a common old man, and I daresay I

strike 'er as funny, compared to the sort of folks she's used to, but what I can't stand is 'er making game of me to my boy. It's—it's cruel, that's what it is, downright cruel. She's bewitched 'im, that's what she's done. Does she think I don't see 'er smiling when I say my words wrong, and what's worse, making Bobbie smile too? She's teaching 'im to look down on me, that's what she's doing, and yet she'll be ready enough to live on my money. She won't think twice about spending it on the food she puts in 'er mouth, and the clothes she puts on 'er back. The *money* ain't common, it's only the old fool who made it.'

'It's *himself* Bobbie ought to be ashamed of,' said Miss Lavender indignantly, but the loyal old man refused to attach any blame to his idol, even while acknowledging the hurt.

''E'd never do it of 'is own accord,' he stoutly maintained. ''E can't bear to go against 'er in anything, that's what it is. Young folks in love are very dependent on one another; I ought to try and remember that.'

'Do you think he is *really* in love with her?' Miss Lavender could not refrain from asking.

'That's the one comfort I 'ave,' replied Mr. Tidd. ''E just worships 'er. D' you think otherwise 'e'd stand 'er despising me, who've been father and mother to 'im all these years?' He turned upon her quite fiercely in his outraged pride, as though daring her to hold a contrary opinion.

'It's extraordinary,' she remarked; 'he's not known her so very long.'

Miss Lavender had not had the advantage of a classical education, else she might possibly have recollected that once upon a time there was a lady called Circe, who possessed the power of turning men into swine in the space of a few minutes!

'Well, anyway, I've got to make the best of it,' Mr. Tidd said heavily.

'Are you sure you *are* making the best of it?' ventured Miss Lavender.

'What d'you mean?'

'Are you sure it is for the best that Bobbie

should marry this young—lady? Wouldn't it be better that he should endure a little unhappiness now than be miserable for the rest of his life ? '

' You mean he should break it off ? '

' There would be no need for that if you were firm, and refused to give him the allowance *she* expects.'

He pondered for a minute, then shook his head.

' One can't arrange for other folks like that,' he said. 'I've never interfered with my boy yet, and I ain't going to begin now. If 'e makes a mistake—well—'e'll only 'ave 'imself to blame, but if *I* make it, 'e'll hold me responsible all 'is life, and that 'ud be worse than anything.'

' If only I could help you,' cried Miss Lavender involuntarily.

He turned to her with a flickering smile.

' You do,' he said gratefully.

' I do! How ? '

' You let me come 'ere and growl over my young cub, like the old bear that I am. You

won't say a word to 'im though, will you? I wouldn't, for the world, let 'im know I was fretting. I wouldn't 'ave told you, only things are 'ard to bear by oneself, and I've nobody to turn to.'

He shook hands hurriedly and was gone, leaving Miss Lavender with an absurd feeling that some of the colour had been taken out of the golden daffodils, and that the grass was not so green, nor the sky so blue, nor the blossom so pink as it had been half an hour ago.

CHAPTER IX

'MR. TIDD has invited me to go for a drive in his motor car, Euphemia,' remarked Miss Lavender, in as natural a tone as she could assume considering the importance of the disclosure she was making.

Euphemia, who happened to be tacking up the mantel border where it had broken loose from its moorings, all but swallowed the nail which she was holding at the moment between her lips.

'If I didn't think there was something on, the way you kept on fidgetin' with your work, puttin' it down and pickin' it up again until I could 'ave screamed aloud,' she said.

Euphemia had a rooted conviction that the real control of anything which moved without visible agency was vested in the powers of darkness, and she steadily refused to believe for one single instant that the chauffeur had any voice

in the matter of the guidance of a car. She was firmly of the opinion that an automobile could, if it chose, take the law into its own hands, and she never saw one coming along the road without fleeing for refuge into the nearest cottage, or, if that was an impossibility, she would open her umbrella and cower behind it, pressed tightly up against the hedge, her eyes shut, faintly hoping for the best, but quite prepared for the worst.

Until the arrival of Mr. Tidd, motors in Diddlebury had been of sufficient rarity to gather together a crowd if one stopped, as it occasionally did, for petrol (which, by the by, was not obtainable), but now even the once safe road up to the Heath was turned into what Euphemia pathetically described as 'a railroad without rails, and engines shootin' about as the fancy takes 'em, without let or 'indrance.'

Euphemia, in fact, regarded motors as a kind of iron monsters with a decided will of their own, and the driver as a modern Mazeppa bound to the back of an animate mechanical steed, to be

borne wherever it might choose to take him in spite of whatever he might wish to the contrary. Small wonder therefore that her imagination jibbed at the mere idea of Miss Lavender adventuring her person inside one of these damnable contrivances!

'You're never goin'?' she inquired with a tactlessness which years of service with her mistress had never cured her of.

'Certainly I am,' replied Miss Lavender loftily, who, until the moment she scented opposition, had been in two minds about accepting the invitation. Then, after a moment's pause:

'Why not?' she added injudiciously.

'Why not!' exclaimed Euphemia. 'I should have thought you'd more sense than to sit there with sech a question upon your lips, that I should. It puts me out of patience people runnin' in the face of providence the way they do. I'd as lief sit on a boilin' kettle as go for a ride on one o' them engines o' destruction.'

'Stuff and nonsense, Euphemia,' said Miss Lavender crossly. 'A motor car is as safe as—

as an armchair. I shall enjoy the experience very much, I'm quite sure.'

Euphemia could be heard to mutter something about ''ardly respectable at your age to go flyin' round the country 'undreds of miles an hour,' but Miss Lavender made no sign of having noticed.

'I'll get you to take a note round to Mr. Tidd presently, Euphemia,' she said; but here she reckoned without her host, for Euphemia flatly refused to be the bearer of any missive whatsoever.

'I won't be party to it,' she declared impressively. 'I'd never forgive myself if 'arm came to you and I'd lifted so much as a finger to bring it about.'

'But what harm can happen to me, Euphemia?' asked Miss Lavender impatiently.

''Ow can I tell?' snapped Euphemia, whose nerves were all on edge. 'Anything's liable to 'appen on one o' them infernal machines dealin' out death and destruction wherever they go, not to mention dust enough to choke anybody. Not only dangerous but disgustin' I call 'em.'

'But you don't mind going in an express train, and an express train goes much faster than a motor,' Miss Lavender pointed out; but Euphemia utterly declined to argue upon that issue.

'A train's different,' was all she would vouchsafe, and no further explanation could be got out of her.

'Well, if you *won't* take the note, I suppose I must go round myself and tell Mr. Tidd that I should like to go,' said Miss Lavender at last, enduring with as good a grace as she could muster what it was evident she could not cure.

'At any rate I shan't 'ave anything on my conscience,' Euphemia said.

'I'll go up and get ready,' went on Miss Lavender.

'All right,' said Euphemia distantly.

'Are—are my boots upstairs?'

'I expect so,' replied Euphemia, who had herself taken them up, as usual, while Miss Lavender was at her breakfast.

'I don't think I need take an umbrella. It doesn't look like rain,' observed Miss Lavender,

getting up and going to the window in a vain endeavor to appear quite at her ease.

'I'm sure I couldn't say what it's going to do,' was Euphemia's rejoinder in tones of studied disinterest.

'I wonder what the glass is doing,' continued Miss Lavender, who pinned her faith to a very aged and out of repair weather-glass which hung in the hall, and which was a thorough-going pessimist, never having been known to rise above 'much rain' even in a prolonged drought.

'I wonder,' said Euphemia laconically.

Miss Lavender, feeling that nothing was to be gained by prolonging the discussion, retired to the fastness of her bedroom to put on her boots, an operation which Euphemia generally performed for her, but which to-day she was evidently to be left to do for herself as a mark of the disgrace into which she had fallen, and when she had done so and arrayed herself in her outdoor things, she stole downstairs and let herself out of the house without returning to the dining-room.

'I'm not a *child*. I'm not a *child*,' she kept on repeating to herself as she went along the road. 'I will *not* allow Euphemia to treat me like a child.' But all the same she could not help feeling very much like a naughty child who has run away from her nurse, though the feeling, instead of inducing her to alter her decision about accepting Mr. Tidd's offer of a drive, only made her the more determined to carry out her intention of going with him.

All the time she was waiting upon her mistress at lunch Euphemia preserved a stony and ostentatious silence with regard to the great event of the afternoon, which only tended to aggravate Miss Lavender, who was burning to discuss it in all its bearings, and if the former wept salt tears into the shepherd's-pie on its journey from the dining-room to the kitchen, it was a secret between her and the pie-dish, and did not in the least tend to diminish her righteous indignation against those who had beguiled her mistress into such a foolhardy undertaking as a drive in a motor.

Directly she had cleared away the remains of lunch, she shut the door of the kitchen with a loud bang which was intended to convey the warning to Miss Lavender that the lamb had better not labour under the delusion that the time had arrived when the leopard was prepared to let it lie down beside it.

The pip-pip of the motor horn outside the front gate at three o'clock elicited a groan of anguish from Euphemia, but she made no attempt to leave the kitchen to see Miss Lavender safely out, as she would ordinarily have done, and did not reply when her mistress called out, 'I'm going now, Euphemia, I shall be in to tea.'

It was only when the front door slammed to, and the whirr of machinery told her that the car was really under way with her beloved Miss Lavender on board, that she came to her senses and tore like one demented out of the kitchen and into the front garden, to catch if it were only a glimpse of the departure, but not even that was granted her, for it was already out of sight and only a faint pip-pip borne back upon the

breeze fell on her ears to assure her that it was grim reality, and not some horrible nightmare.

Persephone, borne away in the arms of Pluto to the nether regions, could not have left behind her more consternation than did Miss Lavender, borne away in the arms of the luxurious Siddeley, in the breast of poor Euphemia, who returned disconsolately to the kitchen, a prey to every kind of horror which her imagination could conjure up.

The afternoon dragged its weary length along, and after centuries of torment, during which Euphemia knitted innumerable rows of a gray woollen stocking which never got any longer, the hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes past four, and with a sigh of relief she put down her work, and, filling the kettle, set it on the fire to boil, while she proceeded to cut some thin slices of bread and butter.

She took extra pains to have everything as dainty as possible, for she was just a little ashamed of her behaviour of the morning, and even put an additional cup and saucer on the

tray in case her mistress should bring Mr. Tidd in to tea.

Five o'clock came, and no sign of the returning wanderers. Half-past five, and they were still absent.

Euphemia became more and more frenzied with each moment that passed, and spent her time running from the kitchen to the front door and back again. When six o'clock struck and they had not yet returned she could bear it no longer. With one ear cocked to catch the first sounds of the motor if it should happen to arrive while she was upstairs, she ascended to her bedroom, and snatching her hat and jacket out of the cupboard came downstairs again, putting them on as she went in order to save time. The consequence was that her headgear rested over her left ear in a manner suggesting scenes of revelry by night, while her jacket, buttoned up crookedly, as far as it was buttoned at all, hung one dejected point between her knees.

She was not perfectly clear in her own mind what her object was in starting off on a search

expedition at this late hour, especially as she had not the ghost of an idea which direction they had gone in, but she felt that anything was better than sitting at home knitting gray stockings, while all the time for aught she knew to the contrary, Miss Lavender was being raced headlong about the country in a motor car which refused to listen to reason.

Caroline Brill was standing at the door of her cottage as Euphemia came pounding down the hill, and stared, open-mouthed, at the unwonted spectacle of that usually staid and decorous person running.

'Whatever—' she began, but Euphemia, without pausing in her headlong flight, merely waved an arm wildly and screamed something over her shoulder of which Caroline only caught the words, 'Miss Lavender—three o'clock—motor —accident.'

She was a second or two in taking in the full meaning of the words, but when she did, she very naturally jumped to an entirely wrong conclusion. 'Elsie,' she shrieked excitedly, 'see

to father's tea if I ain't in 'fore 'e comes back. Pore Miss Lavender's met with an accident out o' one o' them nasty motor cars.' Then, without waiting to explain further, she seized up an old tweed cap belonging to her husband, which for some inscrutable reason she generally reserved for hanging-out-the-washing wear, and started off in pursuit.

Euphemia was of heavier build than Caroline, and though she had a fair start, the latter soon caught her up and, side by side, they panted along in silence.

At the bottom of the hill there was a check. The main road ran at right angles across, and it was impossible to say in which direction that particular Hades lay whither Persephone had been carried off.

'Which way?' asked Caroline eagerly, under the impression that Euphemia was personally conducting her to the scene of an actual and authenticated accident, and in consequence, being morbidly anxious to arrive on the spot ahead of her neighbours, if possible.

If Euphemia had had anybody else as a companion but the despised Caroline she would have broken down at this juncture and wept. As it was, she would have died sooner than let the object of her scorn see her in chastened mood, and since her overwrought nerves were denied the luxury of tears, she sought an outlet for her feelings by rounding upon her unfortunate companion and, metaphorically speaking, rending her in pieces.

'If you'd talk a bit less and do more it might be some 'elp,' she said furiously.

'But what d'you want me to do?' inquired Caroline, meekly bowing before the storm.

'Run and ask,' shouted the exasperated Euphemia, giving her a smart push off in the direction of the village.

Poor Caroline, from sheer nervousness, ran two or three steps before realising that she not only had no notion of where she was to run to, but also had not the ghost of an idea as to what it was she was to ask when she had arrived at her unknown destination. That Euphemia wanted

to learn whether Mr. Tidd's car had been seen going through the village never so much as entered her head.

She paused in her flight, trying to come to some conclusion as to what was required of her; but 'Run,' said an admonitory voice behind her, and she started off once more on her chimerical search, her elastic-sided boots slapping the path at every step with quite a vicious sound. She ran from side to side in much the same state of agitated flurry that a hen displays when overtaken in the road by a vehicle of any sort, but she eventually reached the village, and seeing Mrs. Critchett, the proprietress of the 'Co-operative Stores,' standing in the door of her shop, made a bee-line for her.

'Oh, Mrs. Critchett! Oh dear!' she exclaimed directly she was within earshot. 'There's bin an accident.'

'You've been and scalded one o' the childern,' said Mrs. Critchett accusingly. 'I allays knew it was bound to 'appen one o' these fine days, pouring water straight out o' the kettle into the

bath, with the pore little dears sitting in it so trustful and confident. If you'll give me 'alf a minute I'll call to mind what I did with that sample box o' ointment I 'ad.'

' 'Tisn't the children,' Caroline gasped; 'though well it might be, sech little turkeys as they are, always on the 'op-scotch, and minding what I say no more than if I was a blot of stone, and not so much.'

' Brill's fallen off a ladder,' Mrs. Critchett suggested next.

' 'E wasn't on one,' said his wife mournfully.

' What then?' asked Mrs. Critchett, restraining a strong desire to shake the information out of Caroline.

' It's Miss Lavender,' announced Mrs. Brill with melancholy triumph. 'She's bin turned out o' that nasty motor of Mr. Tidd's, and for all anybody knows to the opposite she's lying in a ditch with both 'er legs broke off under 'er.'

' *There* now. Wasn't I allays saying somebody was bound to get 'urt one o' these days with them 'orrid machines,' exclaimed Mrs. Critchett,

dramatically clasping her heart with both hands. 'Where did it 'appen?'

Caroline shook her head.

'I couldn't say,' she answered vaguely.

'Couldn't say!' echoed Mrs. Critchett. 'Then 'ow d'you know?' she demanded suspiciously.

'Euphemia come and fetched me,' replied Caroline, stretching a point. 'She's standing at the bottom of the 'ill like one distorted.'

'Pore dear!' exclaimed the kind-hearted shopwoman. 'I'll come to 'er this instant minute.'

'But what about the shop?' inquired Caroline, who did not altogether relish the idea of Mrs. Critchett's company, since it inevitably meant her own relegation to the background.

'Oh, the shop must look after itself,' was the hasty reply, as Mrs. Critchett picked up at random a hat lying on the counter intended for sale. 'I've not time to fetch a bonnet,' she explained.

As the hat in question happened to be a child's one of white straw with a wreath of forget-me-

nots round the crown, the effect can be better imagined than described.

'Whatever's the to-do, ma'am?' inquired Mr. Perkins, the butcher, with pardonable curiosity, as the two women lumbered past the row of meat hanging outside his premises.

Mrs. Critchett insensibly slackened her steps at this opportunity of imparting a really exciting bit of gossip to her neighbour.

'It's pore Miss Lavender,' she explained over her shoulder. 'She's bin run over and killed by one of them treacherous motor cars.'

'Well, I'm *damned,*' said Mr. Perkins.

'Perkins!' said a warning voice from the little glass-fronted cupboard where Mrs. Perkins spent her days in company with an important-looking green ledger. A staunch teetotaller, she held strong language only second in abhorrence to strong drink, and considered the two to be in close alliance.

'Sorry, my dear, forgot myself in the excitement of the moment,' apologised Mr. Perkins.

'You forgot *me,* I should think,' replied his

wife starchily. 'You'd better go along and see if you can't be of use, being accustomed to unpleasant sights by reason of your calling.'

'Certainly I will, my dear,' said Mr. Perkins conciliatingly, removing his striped apron and the sharpener which hung round his waist. 'Would you kindly 'and me my coat out of the office.'

Mrs. Perkins did as requested and then, somewhat markedly, pulled down the little window which shut her off in splendid isolation from the rest of the shop and returned to the study of the ledger, plainly intimating that she took no further interest in the matter, while her husband started off in pursuit of the two agitated females who were already half-way back to the spot where Caroline had left Euphemia.

'Me pore dear, I've 'eard the dreadful news,' exclaimed Mrs. Critchett commiseratingly, as soon as she had recovered her breath sufficiently to speak, clutching Euphemia by the arm with one hand, and the white straw hat on to her head with the other.

Euphemia, supposing from this greeting that

her worst fears were well grounded, and that Mrs. Critchett had definite news of an accident about which she herself was still in ignorance, gave vent to a shriek of anguish. 'Where is she? Let me go to 'er,' she besought wildly.

'D'you mean to tell me you don't *know* where she is? queried Mrs. Critchett, slightly taken aback.

'In the 'ospital,' sobbed Euphemia, who gathered from the tone of her friend's voice that she really knew all the time, and was merely parrying the question in order to break the news gently.

'Or the mortary,' added Caroline, feeling rather resentful at the prominence into which Mrs. Critchett had thrust herself. 'I 'ad an aunt 'oo fell out of one o' them spring-boats at Blackheath on a Bank-'oliday and twisted 'er neck right round till she was looking straight be'ind 'er over 'er shoulder, and they took 'er to the mortary, though too late to save 'er life. Eighteen years old she was, and walking out with a most respeckful young man in the plumbing line, and

if only she'd confided 'erself to walking and not 'ad ambitions of soaring above the 'eads of the crowd, she might be alive and well to this very day.'

'Allow me to drive you over to Frippon in the cart, miss,' suggested Mr. Perkins, who had joined the group before this but who, with a proper respect for the female tongue, had hitherto forborne from taking part in the conversation. 'With the little mare between the shafts I'll get you over in less than half an hour.'

'I'm sure I'd be very much obliged, Mr. Perkins,' said Euphemia gratefully, who on ordinary occasions would have died cheerfully sooner than be seen driving in a butcher's cart.

'Not at all, miss, not at all,' said Mr. Perkins genially. 'I've supplied your lady with too many joints in the past not to be proud and glad to supply 'er with what 'elp I can now she's in extremes, as the saying is. I'll pop up and 'arness the little mare and be back again before you've 'ad time to miss me.'

'Ah, Mr. Perkins, it's trouble that brings out

the milk of 'uman kindness when all's said and done,' observed Mrs. Critchett sententiously. 'I'll wait 'ere with the pore dear till you return. There ain't no need for you to stay unless you care, Mrs. Brill,' she went on, turning to Caroline as Mr. Perkins hurried off on his errand. 'I dessay Brill's waiting 'is tea, and I know what a man's like when 'is stomach is crossed.'

'Thank you kindly for your thoughtfulness, Mrs. Critchett,' said Caroline with a stately inclination of the head, the effect of which was rather marred by the tweed cap falling off and having to be retrieved. 'My daughter is quite culpable of getting 'er father's tea, and seeing Euphemia specially invited me to be present, I could 'ardly desert the pore dear in 'er affliction.'

Meanwhile Miss Lavender, bowling swiftly along in the direction of home, after a very pleasant tea at a farmhouse some miles the other side of little Frippon, was thoroughly enjoying herself.

'Euphemia will have guessed we stopped some-

where for tea,' she was saying complacently to Mr. Tidd, in blissful ignorance of the true state of Euphemia's feelings.

'Enjoyed your drive?' inquired Mr. Tidd kindly.

'Oh yes. So much. It's been such a novel experience,' Miss Lavender replied flutteringly. She paused; then, with the precision of a small girl bidding her hostess good-by at a children's party, added shyly, 'Thank you very much for asking me.'

Mr. Tidd looked down at her with rather an amused twinkle in his eyes. 'There's a polite little girl,' he said quizzingly.

Miss Lavender drew herself up with an absurd air of offended dignity which sat ill upon her homely little person. In the inmost recesses of her being she could not help a certain feeling of gratification at the very familiarity of the speech, but it would never do to let it pass without a protest.

'Really, Mr. Tidd,' she forced herself to say, and when the protest had been made, blushed

hotly, a horrible suspicion suddenly springing to birth in her mind that perhaps after all she was behaving like a prudish schoolgirl. 'I'm an old woman,' she added excusingly.

'Are you? I don't know. I can never get out of my mind, somehow, that you were born to be looked after and protected. Perhaps that's why you always seem young to me,' Mr. Tidd said musingly.

'I'm nearly sixty,' said Miss Lavender a little regretfully, and instantly wondered what had prompted her to tell him her age.

'Pooh! What are years?' Mr. Tidd said contemptuously. 'I've known children of eighty and upwards, and old men and women still in their teens.'

'I don't think I've ever been very different to what I am now,' Miss Lavender confessed. 'I suppose I was always old.'

'Or always young,' amended Mr. Tidd. ''Ullo, what's the excitement?'

They had come within sight of the turning up

to Starr Cross, and a knot of people, one of whom was Euphemia, was plainly visible.

Miss Lavender caught hold of him by the arm, nearly causing him to lose control of the wheel.

'Something's happened,' she cried. 'The house is burnt down. I always knew it would be one of these days.'

'Steady, steady,' said Mr. Tidd soothingly. 'Don't go meeting trouble half-way. We'll see what it is in a minute.'

The car stopped just in front of the little group, and Euphemia, detaching herself from it, ran forward with an hysterical sob.

'Thank God you've got back,' she said.

'Have you sent for the fire-engine?' Miss Lavender inquired anxiously.

Euphemia stared stupidly.

'The what?' she asked.

'The fire-engine,' repeated Miss Lavender with feverish haste. 'Don't tell me you've done absolutely nothing. How did it happen? When did it begin? Oh, for goodness' sake, Euphemia,

don't stand there with your mouth open saying nothing. Can't anybody speak?'

Mrs. Critchett stepped forward majestically, the juvenile, forget-me-not trimmed hat on the back of her head, a look of stern disapproval on her usually good-natured face.

'Euphemia got into 'er 'ead that you'd met with an upset,' she said in dignified accents. 'I'm sorry we've assembled 'ere under a mis-appre'ension.'

'You *did* say you'd be back to tea, and the kettle was boilin' and all, and you never came, and I thought — I thought — ' but here Euphemia's feelings got the better of her and, not caring who saw her, she broke down and wept. 'And I 'adn't even come out to see the last of you,' she sobbed.

'It's my fault, Euphemia,' said Mr. Tidd, leaning forward and addressing her across Miss Lavender. 'I didn't think you'd be getting anxious.'

'And it was so lovely out, Euphemia,' added Miss Lavender apologetically.

'Look here, pop in behind and I'll have you home before you can say knife,' suggested Mr. Tidd, seeking to recompense her for her woes, but Euphemia only drew back shudderingly.

'No thank you, sir,' she said, with a swift glance of aversion at the car. 'I've lived through too many imaginary accidents this afternoon to risk a real one. I may be 'ome before you yet.'

Mrs. Critchett and Caroline, left alone together on the pathway, looked at one another blankly.

'I shouldn't 'ave thought it of Euphemia,' said the former, shaking an incredulous head. 'Whatever induced 'er to carry on that way?'

'She's a more feeling 'eart than you'd give 'er credit for to look at,' Caroline said handsomely.

'But there's no call to feel what ain't 'appened,' Mrs. Critchett said, a trifle indignantly. Not only had she been balked of a sensation, but she had been made to look a fool into the bargain.

'It was all the same to 'er as if it 'ad 'appened. That comes of 'aving an imaginary mind,' ex-

plained Caroline. 'I'll say good evening to you, Mrs. Critchett. My 'usbent's waiting 'is tea, if 'e 'asn't already 'ad it.'

Saying which she departed hastily just in time to escape the return of Mr. Perkins with 'the little mare,' thus avoiding the awkwardness of telling him that the cart would not now be required to take Euphemia to Miss Lavender's death-bed.

CHAPTER X

Miss Lavender and Euphemia had both come downstairs with the edges of their tempers a little frayed: the former, because she had received by that morning's post an invitation to Bobbie's wedding; the latter, because she was suffering from what she termed 'my indigestion.'

'As if I should dream of going to see that creature married,' Miss Lavender exclaimed, slapping the offending document down on the table, on which Euphemia had already placed the Bible from which her mistress was accustomed to read a few verses each morning before family prayers. 'If she was being buried, I might go — and enjoy myself!' she added viciously.

'I'm surprised to 'ear you talk so, and you just about to read a chapter,' said Euphemia reprovingly. Any bodily ailment always lifted her up to hitherto unsuspected heights of virtue. 'There's worse things to put up with than losin'

friends by marriage, and that's losin' 'em by death, and it ain't the thing to make a joke upon.'

Miss Lavender wriggled her shoulders impatiently. She had felt a little ashamed of the observation herself and, if she had not been forestalled, had meant to recant, but Euphemia's rebuke had only had the effect of hardening her heart.

'You'd hardly expect me to sit down and cry about it, I suppose?' she said tartly.

Euphemia's only reply was to get up from the chair on which she was sitting, waiting for the reading to commence, and walking solemnly to the table to pick up the Bible and return it to the bookshelf.

'You ain't in the right mood for readin',' she remarked dispassionately. 'And I don't know as I'm in the right mood to hear, for I can't attend to anythin' with this gnawin' pain inside me.'

'Really, Euphemia!' protested Miss Lavender, completely taken aback by this unexpected move.

'I think it is for me to judge whether I am in the right mood or not.'

Euphemia brought the Bible once more back to the table.

'Then you can read to yourself,' she said. 'I ain't goin' to stop and listen, that's flat.'

'I think you had better see Dr. Cruickshank,' said Miss Lavender severely.

She used the threat much as a parent threatens a dose of medicine to a fractious child, but, to her intense surprise, Euphemia fell in with the suggestion quite readily.

'I think so too,' she agreed. 'I'll go down after breakfast. 'E's at the surgery till ten.'

'You aren't really feeling ill, are you?' asked Miss Lavender.

'Well, I ain't goin' to inquire after *'is* 'ealth, you may be quite sure,' was the sole response, and not another word could be got out of Euphemia on the subject of her distemper.

As soon as she had cleared away the breakfast things, she went upstairs and arrayed herself in her best clothes, preparatory to her forthcoming

visit to the doctor's, and before she started, put her head in at the dining-room door.

'I'm just off,' she announced. 'I shan't be gone long; not more'n 'arf an hour, I don't suppose.'

'I'm quite able to take care of myself, thank you, Euphemia,' replied Miss Lavender, a trifle distantly. She had not altogether recovered from the fracas of before breakfast.

Directly she heard the front door shut, Miss Lavender went into the drawing-room, as was her wont, and getting a silk handkerchief out of a drawer, set to work to dust the various ornaments scattered about, and when that was done, remembered that it was Friday, the day appointed for cleaning the knick-knacks on the silver table, so, fetching the necessary implements from the pantry, she drew a chair up to the table and, with a duster spread over her knees, polished away for dear life, forgetting in the absorbing task that the day had started awry.

So engrossed was she that she never noticed how the time was slipping away, until the clock

on the mantelpiece struck eleven, causing her to stop short in her work and wonder why Euphemia had not returned.

'She's a very long time,' she thought. 'Dr. Cruickshank starts on his rounds at ten o'clock, and she can't possibly take an hour getting back. What can have happened to her, I wonder. She surely can't have come in without my noticing?'

She laid down the things she had in her hand and trotted off to the kitchen to investigate, but the back regions were deserted, and she had barely reached the drawing-room again, when she heard the gate click and Euphemia's step on the path.

'Here she is at last,' she said to herself. Then added, 'But how slowly she's walking!'

The front door opened and shut again and she waited expectantly, for she felt sure Euphemia would come and tell her what Dr. Cruickshank had said, but to her astonishment, nothing happened, nor could she hear any sound in the hall. She began to get a little nervous. Some

one had certainly entered the house, and if not Euphemia, who was it?

'Euphemia,' she called out.

Heavy footsteps advanced up the passage and stopped outside the door, as if hesitating to proceed any further, but after a pause which seemed at least five minutes, but which was probably not as many seconds, the handle was turned and Euphemia came into the room, looking so strangely unlike herself that Miss Lavender exclaimed aloud at the sight of her. Her face was the colour of putty save where, on either cheek, a splotch of red, about the size of a florin, stood out vividly against the ashen-gray of her complexion, and she was shaking from head to foot.

'Oh! Whatever is the matter? Whatever is it, Euphemia?' Miss Lavender cried out, startled by the strangeness of her appearance.

Euphemia swallowed down something in her throat.

'I've seen Dr. Cruickshank.'

'Yes?'

'I've seen Dr. Cruickshank,' she repeated

dully. ' 'E says — ' She stopped as though she were a child who had been entrusted with a message and had forgotten it.

' Well?' Then, as a hideous doubt came to her, 'It's nothing *serious*.'

Miss Lavender had risen to her feet, knocking on to the floor, as she did so, some of the silly little silver trinkets which lay on the table at her elbow. She made no attempt to pick them up, but stood there staring at Euphemia, trying to read in her averted face the truth she dreaded.

' Euphemia,' she said sharply, striving to recall her to herself, and at the peremptory tones, Euphemia with an effort raised her eyes to her mistress's face and jerked her head forward.

' 'E's comin' to see me again this afternoon, and goin' to bring Mr. Guy, the surgeon from Little Frippon, with 'im. 'E's afraid it means an operation,' she said with mechanical precision.

The two women stared at one another for some minutes in silence, and into Miss Lavender's eyes crept a reflection of the terror in Euphemia's. It was the latter who spoke first.

'I could 'ave stood an illness; I could 'ave stood bein' in bed and 'avin' to be fussed over and nursed, but an operation! That takes all the courage out of me. Why can't they let me die in peace, without that?' She stretched out a pair of trembling old hands to her mistress as though demanding a reply, and with a supreme effort Miss Lavender pulled herself together and heroically rose to the occasion.

'Who's talking of dying?' she said, with a lightness she was far from feeling. 'Don't be so conceited, Euphemia. Plenty of people have operations without dying, so why you should think yourself singled out for it, I don't know. I call it downright egotism.'

Euphemia smiled forlornly.

''E took me so aback. I s'pose that's what it is. I never thought but what it was nothin' more than indigestion. There! I 'aven't time to waste thinkin' about what mayn't never 'appen.'

She untied her bonnet strings and threw them back over her shoulders, then looked curiously round the room.

'It's queer 'ow different things can look, when you feel different yourself, ain't it!'

'I'm sorry I was cross this morning, Euphemia.'

'That's all right, my dear. That sofa cushion's torn. I'll bring a needle and thread, and mend it when I 'ave a spare five minutes.'

It was pitiful to notice how she fell back upon the everyday triviality, as though trying to resume her normal position and prevent her mind dwelling on graver issues. If, against her will, she was forced to take a place in the front row of the chorus, she would, at least, steer clear of the limelight!

'You must rest this morning. I'll send down and see if Caroline can come up.' But this Euphemia jibbed at.

'I did my work yesterday when I didn't know, so I reckon I can do it to-day when I do,' she said with something of her old spirit.

'I'm sure you oughtn't to.'

'I couldn't sit down, with my 'ands folded in my lap, and watch that Caroline do everything different to my methods. It 'ud drive me crazy.'

She turned and went out of the room before Miss Lavender could say anything more, leaving the latter standing there trying to realise the situation. It was so many years since Euphemia had spent even a day in bed, that it was well-nigh impossible to imagine her laid up. By lunch-time she had worked herself up into such a state of nervous apprehension that Euphemia, who had recovered from her agitation and was almost her old self again, had to turn comforter.

'I dessay I've made it out worse than it is,' she said consolingly. 'Dr. Cruickshank's a nice enough little man, but 'e can't see what's 'appenin' inside of one, 'owever anxious to do so 'e may be. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Mr. Guy didn't give 'im a piece of 'is mind for fetchin' 'im over for nothin'.'

When Mr. Guy did come, however, and he and Dr. Cruickshank had thoroughly overhauled Euphemia, he came down looking so grave that Miss Lavender's heart sank.

'One can never quite say for certain,' he replied, in answer to her anxious inquiries as to the

result of the operation which he declared must be performed without delay.

'But Euphemia has always been so strong,' she urged, as though pleading 'extenuating circumstances.'

'She's no longer a young woman,' was the only reply the surgeon would vouchsafe.

Miss Lavender wished the operation to take place in her house, but the doctors were strongly opposed to this plan, pointing out how it was to the patient's own interests to be moved to the Cottage Hospital at Little Frippon, where all the appliances for nursing were ready at hand, and when Euphemia herself added her voice in favour of the alternative, she reluctantly consented.

It was settled that Euphemia should be driven over to the hospital the following afternoon, and then the vital question arose as to Miss Lavender's welfare during her absence.

Euphemia was anxious that a girl should be obtained through the medium of a registry office, but this Miss Lavender steadily declined.

'A little hussy with streamers to her cap, who has the butcher boy to tea in the kitchen, and no more manners than a Red Indian! I shan't dream of it. I'll have Caroline Brill, if I must have anybody, though I'm perfectly capable of managing by myself.'

'She can't look after the house, let alone you,' objected Euphemia, ignoring the last part of Miss Lavender's statement.

'I shall order Caroline this afternoon, to come in to-morrow,' said Miss Lavender resolutely, rather as though Mrs. Brill were a ton of coals, and Euphemia, who knew that there was a time to speak and a time to keep silence, let the matter drop.

CHAPTER XI

MISS LAVENDER woke up next morning with a vague sense of something disagreeable about to happen, though what it might be she could not at first recollect, until her eyes fell upon Euphemia standing by her bedside. Then she remembered.

In the background hovered a second figure, half-hidden by Euphemia's ample form, bearing in its hands a tray.

Miss Lavender blinked and rubbed her eyes, and, as the figure still remained, drew up the bed-clothes round her neck.

'Who is that?' she demanded.

'It's just Caroline,' explained Euphemia easily. 'I sent for 'er to come first thing. If she's goin' to do for you the next few weeks, she'd

better learn 'er duties from the start. Put the tray down 'ere, Caroline.'

Thus adjured, Caroline, looking a melancholy object in a print dress of Euphemia's, a great deal too large for her, with a small cap perched on the top of her head, advanced, and deposited the tray on the table beside the bed, making a futile endeavour, as she did so, to drop a curtsy, the result of the combined effort being that she overturned the milk jug, the contents of which poured out on the tray.

'Tch, tch, tch,' she clicked, darting an abject glance at her taskmaster, who scowled back.

'If ever I did!' exclaimed that irate body, throwing her hands up in a mute appeal to heaven.

'Seems as though it must be top 'eavy,' said the miserable Caroline, vainly attempting to repair the damage by mopping up the spilt milk with a very dirty handkerchief, which she afterwards wrung out into the cup.

'As if I 'adn't enough to bear without you! 'Ere, give me the tray.'

Euphemia snatched it away from Caroline's ministrations and stalked out, leaving her planted there.

'You had better get my bath water,' said Miss Lavender at last, uncomfortably aware that Caroline's gaze was riveted upon the little bald patch on the top of her head, which, in the daytime, was concealed from view by a black velvet bow.

'Bath water?' repeated Caroline vaguely, as though it was the first time she had ever heard of such a thing.

'Yes. *Bath* water,' said Miss Lavender sharply.

'Bath water,' repeated Caroline once more, walking across to the washstand and looking feebly around.

'Not there,' said Miss Lavender. 'In the housemaid's closet.'

Caroline tilted towards the door and disappeared, only to shove her head in again the next minute.

'Where was it you said?' she inquired.

'Never mind; Euphemia will get it.'

'I don't mind if you'll tell me where.'

'The — housemaid's — closet,' said Miss Lavender slowly, dwelling on each word, in order that it might sink into Caroline's thick brain. 'Where—the—brooms—and—cans—are kept.'

'I'll try and find it,' Caroline made reply, though as one without hope.

At this juncture, happily, Euphemia arrived upon the scene with a clean tray.

'Take Caroline to the housemaid's closet, and show her the hot-water tap,' commanded Miss Lavender, rather as if the housemaid's closet was a museum, and the hot-water tap an exhibit under a glass case.

'I've got your can outside the door,' volunteered Euphemia. 'Caroline only wants to bring it in.'

Whether Caroline wanted to or not, she did not dare disobey, and presently staggered in under the weight of a large can, which she lumped on to the carpet with such vehemence

that part of its contents ran over the edge and formed a pool at her feet.

'The bath's against the wall yonder,' said Euphemia, nodding in its direction.

Caroline gazed at it with an air of interest, but apparently decided to take no further steps in the matter, for she continued to stand where she was, and made no movement either to fetch the bath or remove herself out of the stream of water flowing round her prunellas.

'See if it'll come if you whistle,' suggested Euphemia in exasperation.

'D'you want it out of there ?' asked Caroline in mild surprise.

Miss Lavender, listening to the foregoing dialogue from the shelter of the bed-clothes, marvelled. Here was no new, chastened Euphemia, as she had half expected, but the same old one, with the same sarcasms, the same dry humour, the same impatience at poor Caroline's shortcomings. She had not grasped the fact that self, like water, finds its own level.

She said as much when Caroline, harried out

of the room by Euphemia to start preparing breakfast, left them alone together.

Euphemia, who was employed in removing the traces of the havoc wrought by Caroline, looked up and gave a short laugh.

'I suppose you think I ought to be down on my knees prayin' instead of wipin' up water,' she said. 'Well, p'raps I ought, but that ain't my way. I've 'ad to work 'ard all my life, and get my prayin' in when I could, and it seems to me as the Almighty'll take reckonin' o' that when it comes to the Day of Judgment, so long as the work's been honest. I've no patience with folks who talk as if the Lord didn't know anythin' about the work which 'E created. Don't it say, "In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread"? Not as I'm one as perspires freely though,' she concluded rather regretfully.

'But there was Martha,' said Miss Lavender anxiously. 'You remember about Martha?'

'There was Martha certainly,' Euphemia conceded grudgingly, but in a minute she brightened up.

'But then,' she added, 'she fussed over 'er work after it was done, and kept on thinkin' 'ow she might a' done it better, I dessay, and if she'd done 'er best at the start-off, she couldn't do no more, and was just wastin' 'er time.'

This novel reading of Martha's character somewhat startled Miss Lavender.

'I never thought of it in that way,' she said.

'Ah! People don't think as much as they ought,' rejoined Euphemia. 'I've generally got a thought like that in the back of my mind, to bring out when I'm brushin' the stairs.'

'Why when you are brushing the stairs?' inquired Miss Lavender wonderingly.

'Because if there's one bit o' work I'm tempted to scamp more than another it's that, so I says to myself, "Now directly you've done the last stair, you'll 'ave to put that thought (whatever it may 'appen to be) away," so when it's somethin' I want to get 'old of, I keep on brushin' till I've fixed it to my fancy.'

But in spite of the fact that Euphemia put such a good face on the matter, it was a trying

moment when half-past two came, and the fly stood at the door waiting to carry her off to the hospital.

In front of the glass, in the little bedroom over the kitchen which had sheltered her for so many years, she tied the strings of her Sunday bonnet with fingers that trembled stupidly, and when she was quite ready and there was no longer any excuse for delay, she took a last look round at all the familiar objects—the truckle bed; the painted washstand with its set of chipped crockery; the pictures on the wall, gleaned for the most part from Christmas Numbers, and fastened up with tacks; the white mug on the mantelpiece, with a view of the chain pier at Brighton, which Miss Lavender had brought her back after a visit she had paid there something like thirty years ago—and bravely swallowed down the lump which rose in her throat as she bade each and all a mute farewell, walked resolutely to the door and, opening it, passed out, without so much as a single glance backward.

In the hall Miss Lavender was waiting, dreading the leave-taking, yet feverishly anxious to get it over and done with, while at the end of the passage leading to the kitchen hovered Caroline, prepared, at the first available opportunity, to give utterance to her feelings in the manner usual to her class.

The tin box containing a great deal of unnecessary raiment was already outside the fly, and the driver stood with his hand on the door, as if hinting that it was time to be off; at the gate, a small crowd, consisting of two diminutive boys and a baby in a perambulator, blocked the path in a state of subdued expectancy, taking their chance, as it were, of being the witnesses of some enthralling scene.

Euphemia, at the bend of the stairs, paused impressively. For the first time in her life she dimly realised how intoxicating limelight can be, and what it means to be the central figure of a drama.

She descended the rest of the way with a slightly overdone air of nonchalance, paying

minute care to the buttoning of her gloves, as though that was the only thing that really mattered; but when she reached the spot where Miss Lavender was standing, she forgot everything save that she was parting from the mistress who had dominated her every thought and deed since first, as a girl, she had entered the house which she was now leaving, perhaps for the last time.

The poor little lady's composure had entirely given way and the tears were streaming down her face. Both women, though they dared not put it into words, had an intuition that the moment had been reached when the quiet backwater down which they had glided side by side must be exchanged for the swift-flowing current of the river whose outlet is the sea, and the prospect filled them with nameless terrors.

With a gallant effort Euphemia screwed her trembling lips into a smile.

'Now, my dear,' she said, as a nurse might talk to a troubled child, 'I'll be back again almost before you know I'm gone. Don't you get

fretting else I shall fret too. Caroline'll take care of you while I'm away.'

Even when mentioning Caroline she managed to infuse some warmth into her voice. Not for worlds would she have left Miss Lavender with any doubts of the future to worry or perplex her. Everything, at this moment of parting, must be made to appear rosy and bright.

' Oh, Euphemia! Whatever shall I do without you? You *will* come back, won't you? You *will* come back ? ' she sobbed, as though with Euphemia lay the power of choice.

' Eh, I'll come back, my lamb, never fear,' said Euphemia bravely, and somehow the endearment did not sound in the least silly or out of place.

For the time they ceased to be mistress and maid, and became simply two old women who, after years of trudging together along the roadway of life, were being separated, possibly never to meet again.

For an instant Euphemia bent and, folding the other in her arms, held her very tightly, as

though she were trying to shield her from some unseen foe, then, kissing her with infinite tenderness, let her go and turned to Caroline.

'You'll look after 'er,' she said fiercely, almost theateningly. 'You won't let 'er go out without 'er woollen spencer, and you'll see the sheets are properly aired; and don't forget the 'ot-water bottle at nights.'

'Not if I can remember I won't,' answered the poor silly creature; then, 'Oh, Euphemia,' she went on, 'supposing you *don't* come back ?'

'Why should I suppose any such rubbish ?' demanded Euphemia, trying to frown her into silence.

'I was only thinking—' began the tactless Caroline falteringly, but Euphemia interrupted before she could proceed.

'Then don't, unless you can think sensible,' she said; then, with one more embrace of her mistress, she was gone, and the last they saw of her as the fly rolled off down the hill was a bright yellow kid glove waving a handkerchief out of the window.

CHAPTER XII

THE news of Euphemia's departure for the Cottage Hospital at Little Frippon came as a welcome diversion to Diddlebury, whose inhabitants had not experienced such a thrill since the poisoning of Mrs. Critchett's cat the previous autumn, and who were getting rather tired of hearing what her sensations had been on discovering the corpse half-buried under Mr. Perkins's manure heap, and the verbatim report of her subsequent interview with the parish constable.

Quite a number of people appeared at the cottage the following day to glean information, and among them Mrs. Bowers in a state of such tremulous agitation that a stranger might well have been pardoned for jumping to the conclusion that Euphemia was a close and dearly-loved relative . She ran into the room, when an-

nounced by Caroline, with flurried short steps, and clasped Miss Lavender, who had risen to receive her, tightly to her breast, as though defying Fate to proceed to any further lengths now that there was a protectress at hand.

'My poor dear!' she exclaimed in tones of deep emotion. 'What sad, sad news.'

'You mean about Euphemia?' said Miss Lavender, extricating herself from her visitor's embrace, and hurriedly seating herself upon the sofa to avoid any repetition of it.

'What else,' Mrs. Bowers said, sinking on to the vacant place beside her, and possessing herself of one of Miss Lavender's unwilling hands, which she then kneaded softly by way of expressing her sympathy.

'Such a shock!' she continued in the same deep tones, shaking her head slowly from side to side.

'Yes, it—it was dreadfully sudden. I had no notion. I—I can hardly realise that it is not some horrible nightmare.'

'I know, dear,' said Mrs. Bowers. 'I've not

forgotten what I went through before the RECTOR had his operation.'

'Dear me! I don't think I ever heard of that,' remarked Miss Lavender in some surprise. 'Was it a serious one?'

'An abscess, dear,' said Mrs. Bowers, in a voice which forbade any further discussion on the subject and made Miss Lavender feel that she had been very nearly guilty of an impropriety. As a matter of fact, the abscess had been situated in the rector's lower jaw and not in any obscure portion of his anatomy, but it would have marred the effect to have told her so; consequently Mrs. Bowers preferred to leave her with the impression that the operating table and not the dentist's chair had been the scene of bloodshed.

'But what about you?' inquired Mrs. Bowers after an impressive pause. 'Who is taking care of you meanwhile?'

'Caroline Brill is with me until—until one knows more definitely about things,' replied Miss Lavender.

Mrs. Bowers sniffed contemptuously.

'Oh, Caroline Brill!' she observed, a world of meaning in her voice.

'She's very willing,' said Miss Lavender excusingly.

Mrs. Bowers, releasing Miss Lavender's hand, dived into a velvet bag which hung at her side and produced therefrom a sheet of paper.

'Of course you can't go on with her,' she said decidedly.

'Oh, she does very well temporarily,' Miss Lavender assured her hastily.

'I've brought a list of girls belonging to my Friendly Society,' went on Mrs. Bowers, paying no attention to the interruption. 'There are two or three of them would come to you only too gladly.'

'It's very kind of you, but I really can't decide anything at present,' Miss Lavender said desperately.

'Now Anna Richards is leaving her situation on Monday. I should think she would do admirably in a place like yours,' suggested Mrs.

Bowers, not heeding Miss Lavender's remark. 'A bit rough, of course, but you can't expect perfection nowadays.'

'Thank you, but——'

'Or there's Marion Giles,' pursued Mrs. Bowers, silencing the protest with a wave of the hand. '*Such* a nice-looking girl, if it wasn't for that unfortunate squint, but as you entertain so little that wouldn't matter, would it? Or Florrie Johnson. She's been in quite a good place in Frippon. She's only going because her father came drunk to the house and made such a disturbance they had to call in the police, and that wasn't *her* fault, of course, poor girl.'

'But I've got Caroline,' persisted Miss Lavender, with a horrible dread that if she showed the slightest signs of wavering, one of Mrs. Bowers's nominees would be dumped down upon her in spite of herself.

Mrs. Bowers folded up the paper and returned it to her bag, which she closed with a vicious snap.

'Of course if you're *satisfied* with Caroline

Brill I've nothing more to say,' she remarked rising to her feet.

'Oh, but you aren't going,' said Miss Lavender as she saw Mrs. Bowers putting on her gloves, her sense of hospitality overcoming her intense desire to be left alone. 'Won't you stay and have some tea ? '

' Thank you. I have other calls to pay,' said Mrs. Bowers; and from the way she spoke it was obvious that the visit of condolence had been reduced to the level of a mere social duty.

Miss Lavender, trusting she was successfully concealing the relief she felt, rang the bell for Caroline, who, greatly to her chagrin, presently appeared minus the cap which Euphemia had bestowed upon her as a parting gift, and with a tail of hair hanging down her back.

' Yes ? ' she said. 'What is it ? '

' Show Mrs. Bowers out,' said Miss Lavender.

Caroline stared, uncomprehending.

' Open the front door for her,' exclaimed Miss Lavender irritably, feeling that it would be an immense relief to shake her.

'It ain't shut,' remarked Mrs. Brill in matter-of-fact tones.

'Kindly do as I bid you,' said Miss Lavender sharply.

'But 'ow am I to open a door that ain't shut?' inquired Caroline helplessly.

Before an answer to this pertinent question could be forthcoming a bell rang.

'That *is* the front door bell,' exclaimed Miss Lavender in tones of relief. 'Go and see who it is at once.'

Caroline, thankful to be spared further mental worry, hastened out of the room to do her bidding, returning in a few minutes to announce Mr. Tidd.

'But where is he?' asked Miss Lavender wonderingly.

'Oh, I've put 'im to wait in the dining-room,' replied Caroline easily.

Mrs. Bowers smiled sardonically.

'How odd,' she remarked. 'Don't bother, dear. I'll find my own way out. Gentlemen don't like being kept waiting, do they?'

With a little nod she was gone, leaving Miss Lavender staring after her with crimson cheeks.

'Why on earth didn't you show Mr. Tidd straight in here?' she demanded, rounding upon Caroline with a fierceness quite out of keeping with her usual self.

''E wasn't wishful to come,' exclaimed Caroline unabashed. '"Anybody with Miss Lavender?" sez 'e. "Only Mrs. Bowers," I sez. Then (if you'll excuse my mentioning it, miss), "Damn," sez 'e, be'ind 'is teeth like, but not so low as to escape me; so, acting according to 'is language, I pops 'im into the dining-room till she was safe out o' the way.'

'You had no business to do any such thing. Go and fetch Mr. Tidd here immediately.'

Caroline departed on her errand muttering something below her breath about 'no pleasing some folks. The more you do, the more you may do,' but Miss Lavender turned a deaf ear to her complaints and, when she had left the room, stood there waiting, trying to regain the composure which Mrs. Bowers and Caroline

between them had succeeded in driving away, before Mr. Tidd appeared.

When at length he was ushered in she instantly noticed a subtle change in him. There seemed a kind of neglected look about him, and his usually dapper dress showed obvious signs of want of attention, as though it was not worth while bothering over.

'You don't look well,' she said concernedly as they shook hands.

'I'm right enough. I miss the boy, that's all,' he replied wearily.

'But isn't he with you?' asked Miss Lavender in surprise. She had not seen either of them for some days, but that Bobbie was not at home had never occurred to her. She had supposed that, during these last few weeks before his wedding, he would have jealously guarded each second of the short time that remained to him of that close companionship which was so infinitely precious to the old man whom he was leaving.

''E won't be home again now.' The words came out heavily and slowly.

'Do you mean he is not coming back here again before his wedding day?'

In spite of her endeavours Miss Lavender could not help the astonishment she felt showing itself in her voice.

Mr. Tidd nodded.

'That's it,' he answered. 'After all, I don't know that it matters much. It 'ad to come soon anyhow, and I've been saved brooding over it. The young don't see eye to eye with the old folks. How should they? Nobody can learn without being taught, and there's but one teacher of sympathy and that's experience. You mustn't blame my boy too much, Miss Lavender. He don't understand, that's all.'

'Then he should be made to,' Miss Lavender said severely.

'It's but following the laws of nature,' maintained Mr. Tidd, unwilling to admit that there could be any flaw in his idol. 'Don't we read in the Bible that a man shall leave 'is father and mother and cleave unto 'is wife.?'

'I have yet to learn that Miss Chalmers *is* his wife,' observed Miss Lavender tartly.

Mr. Tidd snapped his fingers.

'Straw-splitting!' he remarked. 'But there, I didn't come 'ere to talk about my affairs. I hear you're in trouble about your old friend. You'll be missing her sorely.'

The sympathy in his voice proved altogether too much for Miss Lavender.

'We've lived with one another so long,' she said, breaking down and sobbing. 'It sounds so silly for an old woman to say it, but I simply don't know how I'm going to manage alone. Ever since I was a girl Euphemia has looked after me, and now, without her, I feel like—like a cripple without a crutch.'

'I know. I feel that way myself, at times,' Mr. Tidd said. 'You'll get yours back again though,' he added half enviously.

Miss Lavender fumbled in her pocket for her handkerchief.

'Shall I?' she said, two big tears overflowing and rolling down her cheeks. 'Shall I? If only I knew.'

Mr. Tidd produced from an inner pocket an enormous red bandana which he solemnly handed to her.

'It won't be the first time you've dried your eyes on my hankerchief,' he observed, noticing that she hesitated.

'You remember that,' she said, smiling through her tears, a little wintry smile, and hesitating no longer.

'Yes. I remember,' he said gravely.

'I always was a coward,' she remarked tremulously, mopping her eyes vigorously on the bandana. 'You'll always connect me with crying.'

'I just happen to have been by,' he answered. 'That's all. Seems almost as if—as if I was meant to dry your tears.'

'I won't be so stupid again,' said Miss Lavender, carefully folding up the red handkerchief and laying it on the table beside her. 'I'll have this washed before you have it back.'

Mr. Tidd stretched out his hand and, picking it up, restored it to his pocket.

'It won't be any the worse,' he said. 'Now look here, Miss Lavender, why not pack up your trunks and come and stay at Starr Cross until Euphemia's home again?'

Miss Lavender looked at him with startled eyes.

'Oh, I—I don't think I could do that,' she said primly.

'Why not? You wouldn't be alone. Mrs. Jarvis is coming to pay a long visit to-morrow.'

'Who is Mrs. Jarvis ?' she inquired.

'She was Bobbie's governess when he was a little chap. She only left to be married. The man turned out a scamp and left her at the end of a year, and a good riddance too. He's dead now and she tries to keep going by teaching a lot of little brats, but she's broken down lately, and so——'

He stopped abruptly, but Miss Lavender finished the sentence for him.

'And so you're being kind to her, like, it seems to me, you are to everybody.'

'Well. Will you come ?' he asked, switching off the conversation to another line.

Miss Lavender shook her head.

'I can't settle anything definitely until—until I know what's going to happen,' she said, and he knew she was referring to the result of the operation.

'When's it to be?' he inquired.

'I don't know for certain. The matron was to write to me to-day, so I shall hear to-morrow morning, I hope.'

Mr. Tidd crossed to the door, and stood there with his hand on the knob. 'I dessay you'll be wanting to go over to Frippon most days. The car's at your disposal, mind, whenever you want it.'

Before she could say a word of thanks he had fled, and the next minute she heard the click of the garden gate as he passed out.

The house suddenly seemed very lonely. A shrill voice from the back regions announced that 'a few more years should roll,' but that was only a vocal effort of Caroline's, and Caroline was one of those people who have the effect of intensifying, rather than diminishing the sense of loneliness. By the time she sat down to her badly-cooked dinner, Miss Lavender had decided that directly she knew how things turned out, whether for good or ill, she would follow Mr. Tidd's advice and pack up her trunks and go round to Starr Cross.

CHAPTER XIII

Miss Lavender sat by Euphemia's bedside in the small ward of the hospital. There were only two beds in it, and the second one was vacant, so that she had the minor consolation of feeling that the last supreme moments were hers alone.

For it had come to that. Euphemia was dying! Very soon now she would have left this world behind her, with its joys and sorrows, its loves and hate, its hopes and disappointments, and would have set out on the next stage of the journey across the desert of Time, beyond which lies Eternity and the Peace which passes understanding.

She lay so still and motionless that more than once Miss Lavender thought she had already loosed her feeble grasp on life; but though the fires were burning low they were not quite extinguished, for suddenly she opened her eyes and her lips moved, forming words yet uttering no sound.

'What is it you want to say?' Miss Lavender asked, bending over her.

Euphemia rallied her forces, and spoke in a weak whisper:

'I'm givin' you—a lot—o' trouble.'

Miss Lavender stroked the red, work-coarsened hand which rested outside the bed-clothes.

'You've taken care of me for so many years,' she said. 'Don't you think it is my turn to take care of you now?'

'I 'adn't nothin' else to mother but you,' Euphemia said, the words coming out very slowly and with many pauses in between. 'If a woman misses the best in life, if she never 'as the chance given 'er of bein' a wife or of 'avin' little ones, it leaves a big gapin' 'ole in 'er 'eart which 'as to be filled some'ow.' Her dim eyes looked back rather wistfully over the long stretch of years which lay behind.

'You've been 'usband and child to me,' she went on, screwing her mouth up into the faint ghost of a smile. 'I suppose that's why I used sometimes to speak my mind out to you, though

I was always sorry for it afterwards. It's a queer thing, ain't it.'

'What is ? '

'Why, that the more one cares for a body, the easier it is to lose one's temper with 'em. It some'ow don't seem worth while to get angry with ordinary folks.'

'You ought not to talk.'

'It won't make no difference. There's somethin' I want to tell you.'

'What is it ? '

'You remember George Green ? '

Miss Lavender searched her memory in vain.

'I'm afraid I don't,' she said at last.

'Not the red-'eaded young fellow 'oo drove Wigley's cart ? '

'Wigley, the baker's cart! But that must be thirty years ago, Euphemia.'

'Thereabouts. I've often tried to tell you, but I could never pluck up courage. I used to 'ave 'im to supper in the kitchen, unbeknownst to you ! '

'Never mind that now.'

'I didn't think, at the time, as it wasn't my own food 'e was eatin,' but I've 'ad it on my conscience since. There! I've told you anyway.'

'As if it mattered! As if anything matters but you.'

For a long time there was silence, then Euphemia spoke again.

'If Caroline comes to the funeral,' she said, 'don't let 'er wear that black 'at with the crepe bow, for I can't bear it. You can give 'er my bonnet with the black currants in, if come she must.'

'Oh, don't talk in that way,' cried Miss Lavender piteously.

'My dearie, where's the 'arm? It won't be me you're buryin'; only my poor old, ugly body. I never took much account o' that, as far as looks went, not but what it's unbecomin' in me to find fault with the Almighty's 'andiwork. I don't doubt 'E 'ad 'Is purpose in makin' me plain. Per'aps 'E foresaw you'd 'ave need of me all these years, and if I'd been personable, the chances are I'd 'ave got took in by some

worthless chap. Look at that Caroline! Though to be sure, she can never 'ave been much to boast of in the way o' looks.'

The nurse bustled in at this juncture, and shook an admonitory finger. 'I thought talking was forbidden,' she said. 'How do you expect us to get you mended if you go on like this? You're a naughty old woman.'

" You get along with you,' retorted Euphemia with a faint return of her former spirit. 'I'm neither an idiot nor a child, and I've still got the breath in my body to tell you so. My Miss Lavender ain't 'ere at this time o' night for no reason, and I know well enough what the reason is.'

' I never knew such a one to argue,' the nurse said, darting a hasty glance at the figure seated beside the bed. 'You drink this milk, and don't you open your mouth again, else we shall have to ask your Miss Lavender to go.'

'I'll lie quiet, if you'll see Miss Lavender 'as something too. She ain't used to sittin' up and she's got plenty to go through with presently.'

So the kindly nurse went away, and returned in a few minutes with a cup of beef-tea in which was a large spoonful of brandy, and insisted on Miss Lavender drinking it down.

'She'll probably sleep now, if you'd like me to tuck you up on the other bed,' she said. 'I promise to wake you if there's any change.'

But Miss Lavender would not hear of that, and, when Euphemia fell into a heavy doze, sat on, not daring to stir for fear of disturbing her.

One by one the leaden hours dragged themselves away, and still Euphemia slept. The darkness and silence of the outside world gave place to the gray, ghostly light of early dawn and the soft twittering of newly wakened birds. A whispering breeze rustled the tree-tops, and stealing in through the open window gently stirred the blind.

Miss Lavender very, very cautiously withdrew her hand from Euphemia's clasp and, tiptoeing across the room peeped out.

Behind the distant ridge of hills the sky was ablaze with glory which every second increased.

Golden, and violet, and delicate rose-pink were mixed together in inextricable confusion on a slate-blue background until she could almost fancy that they were the colours on the palette, waiting there ready for the Master-hand to use in His work.

She stood there for some minutes, drinking in the beauty of the scene, and when she had steeped her soul in the dew of the morning, turned back refreshed and soothed, to resume her post beside the dying woman.

Euphemia was awake now, her gaze fixed upon her beloved mistress as though she would carry with her into the valley of death itself the lineaments engraven on her mind of the dear, familiar face.

'Is there anything I can do for you? Anything that you want?' Miss Lavender asked, bending over her.

'The blind,' Euphemia whispered, so low that Miss Lavender could barely hear the words.

'Do you want it up?'

'Up.'

Miss Lavender went again to the window and,

drawing up the blind, flooded the room with the dazzling splendour of the eastern sky, which touched even the bare, white-washed walls with fairy fingers and transformed them into mellow gold.

Euphemia, as the radiance fell upon her, turned her head so that her failing eyes might take their last look at the beauty of the world which soon would know her no more.

For a minute or two she lay there, with an expression of such perfect contentment on her face that Miss Lavender, watching her, marvelled, then she gave a little sigh of satisfaction, as though the last doubt had been solved in her mind.

'Ain't that—proof enough—for anybody?' she said, then her eyes closed again.

Miss Lavender, kneeling by the bedside, saw her lips move at intervals, and once she smiled, as though her thoughts were pleasant ones, but gradually even those faint signs of animation ceased and, but for the scarcely perceptible rise and fall of her breast, she might have been dead already, so still did she lie.

The nurse came in and stood at the other side of the bed, keenly watching, but she did not disturb the dying woman with useless ministrations. The time for that was past.

How long they remained thus Miss Lavender never quite knew, but she was dimly conscious that presently the nurse leant down and laid her hand on the breast of the figure lying so strangely still between them, then came round to where she knelt, and touched her gently on the shoulder.

Without any words, she knew what that touch meant, and, rising quite steadily to her feet, bent over and kissed Euphemia's forehead, a long, lingering, farewell kiss.

'Good-by, dear friend. Sleep well, after the hard day's toil,' she whispered, so softly that not even the nurse heard her, then without another word, another look, she turned and walked quietly out of the room.

'Let me get you a cup of tea,' the nurse said anxiously, following her out, but Miss Lavender shook her head. Even tea, that panacea for

most of the ills to which feminine flesh is heir to, could not ease a desolate heart. Like a stricken animal, her one and only idea was to creep away out of sight, to hide herself in some dark corner where nobody could see her, and there try and piece together the puzzle which has perplexed poor humanity ever since the day when the Cherubim with the flaming sword mounted guard over the Tree of Life.

'I don't want anything, except to get home,' she answered.

'But have you any conveyance to take you? It's only six o'clock. The livery stables won't be open yet,' said the nurse doubtfully. 'Why shouldn't you lie down on the sofa in the matron's sitting-room for an hour or two?'

'I must get home,' Miss Lavender repeated. 'I'll walk round and knock them up. It'll be —something to do.'

'Well, if you're sure.'

'Yes, yes.'

They passed down the dark staircase, where the blinds still shrouded the windows, and across

the hall, where a feeble jet of gas struggled against the light which filtered in through the ivy-covered fanlight above the front door, which the nurse opened, letting in a rush of cool sweet air. 'I don't want to worry you at such a moment,' she said apologetically, 'but there are—arrangements to be made.'

'I'll come over later,' Miss Lavender replied, with a desperate feeling that the nurse would try to keep her against her will if she did not hurry away. So eager was she to be gone that she pulled the door to behind her, and it was not until she was on the path outside that she noticed a car standing a little way along the street.

The driver's back was towards her but it somehow looked familiar, and even as she paused, uncertain whether to advance or retire, he turned and she saw that it was Mr. Tidd.

At sight of her he clambered out of the seat and came down the path to meet her, looking very shy and uncomfortable.

'You!' she exclaimed.

'I 'ope you don't think I've taken a liberty?'

he said anxiously, carefully refraining from meeting her eye.

'I—I don't understand. How do you happen to be here? I'm in great trouble. I want to get home.' The words came tumbling out of her mouth incoherently. She felt the necessity of saying something and spoke out what was uppermost in her mind through sheer inability to choose what she would say.

'I'll drive you home.'

She felt grateful to him for the brevity of the remark; he sought no explanation and she offered none. There would be time for that in the future. At present she was thankful to crawl into the motor and realise that all need for exertion was at an end. That he had been there was sufficient. The why and wherefore of his appearance at the precise moment when he could be of service to her seemed of hardly any importance beside the fact that he *was* there.

It was not until later that she dragged from him the unwilling confession that he had been there all night, in case she wanted him.

'But how did you know I was there?' she asked wonderingly.

'I found out,' he replied evasively.

'But how?' she insisted.

'I made Mrs. Brill promise to come round and tell me if you were sent for in a hurry,' he said as shamefacedly as if he had been caught committing some awful crime, and failing to add that Caroline was half a sovereign to the good over the transaction.

'Then—then you were there all night!' said Miss Lavender accusingly.

Mr. Tidd wriggled miserably.

'It's—it's getting nice and warm o' nights now,' he responded in tones of exculpation. To hear him one would think he had been accused of some heinous offence!

'And you didn't even ask questions! Didn't you want to know?'

'It wasn't so difficult to guess, and any'ow, you'd 'a' told me if you'd wanted, without my bothering you,' he said simply.

'I think,' said Miss Lavender slowly. 'that you are the truest gentleman I have ever met.'

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was no doubt that Caroline enjoyed a certain amount of reflected glory from Euphemia's death. She sprang from a class which regards such an event as, in some extraordinary manner, redounding to the credit of all who happen, in however remote a degree, to be affected by it. It is true she shed abundant tears; indeed, every time she met Miss Lavender about the house she started off a fresh bout of weeping, but that was partly etiquette. Occupying as she did, even though temporarily, the place of the deceased, she considered it her duty and privilege to display a corresponding emotion, and she entirely failed to understand Miss Lavender's calm acquiescence in the decrees of Providence. She felt that her employer was not exacting her full measure of enjoyment out of the situation, and was hard put to it to answer the sympathetic inquiries of the tradespeople

who called for orders, until she hit upon a reply which satisfied her, both on account of its diplomacy and its sentiment.

'Ah, she's taking it 'ard, poor dear,' she would say on such occasions. 'If she could only cry it 'ud do 'er good, but there she sits like a stoned image, paying 'eed to neither 'er food nor what anybody sez to 'er.'

Perhaps, if anyone could have seen Miss Lavender in the privacy of her bedroom, with the door locked to prevent the incursions of Caroline, who followed her about with little basins of greasy-looking beef-tea, he would have thought differently, for it was only then that she allowed herself to think, and the brave front she showed to the world gave place to the helpless tears of loneliness and self-pity. She never pretended, even to herself, that the tears were for Euphemia. Her faith was strong enough to assure her that, whatever the change which had come to her faithful old friend, it was one for the better. If she wept, it was for herself, and her house left to her desolate.

She had decided that Euphemia should be laid to rest in the quiet little graveyard at the foot of the hill, where her own father and mother were buried, and where the violets and primroses grew thick among the grassy mounds and white tombstones which clustered round the small gray church in which so many broken hearts had poured out their complaints before their God and showed Him of their trouble.

So the tired old body was brought home, and once more, though now in death, slept in the little room above the kitchen, surrounded by all the familiar objects which it had loved in life, to the shocked surprise of Caroline, who looked upon it as a slur cast upon Euphemia's memory.

If Caroline could have had her way, the coffin would have been placed on the spare-room bed, and accorded a sort of lying-in-state to which neighbours and friends might be bidden, with herself as cicerone, and she went so far as to hint that Miss Lavender was behaving shabbily in acting otherwise.

Miss Lavender, however, knew very well that

if Euphemia was able to look back across the great gulf fixed between them, she would desire nothing better than that the body from which she had been set free should lie in the chamber which had once been its own.

So to her own room she was carried, and Miss Lavender took good care to lock the door and keep the key in her pocket, to Caroline's intense disgust, a disgust which was not in the least degree mitigated by the fact that she herself was put to occupy the best bedroom.

'I ain't a guest and I ain't a corpse,' she complained to the milkman, the first morning after she slept there. 'I'm neither one thing nor the other, yet feeling a bit of both.'

'More like some one 'oo's died while on a visit,' suggested the milkman, who was a humorist in his own estimation, and consequently had a reputation to live up to.

'Ye-es. More like that I s'pose,' replied Caroline doubtfully, afraid to agree too cordially lest there might be more in the remark than met the eye.

'When's the funeral?' the milkman inquired. He always liked to gather stray items of information, to deliver with the milk on his rounds.

'Thursday,' responded Caroline gloomily. 'Though it don't 'ardly amount to a funeral. It's just a burying, if you understand.'

The milkman did understand and nodded comprehendingly.

'Not a soul invited to the church, let alone to the 'ouse,' went on the scandalised Caroline, 'and but a single-'orse brougham from 'Obbes's to follow the 'earse! She couldn't 'ave been done with less style if she'd been left to the parish.'

'You'll be going though, I take it?' queried the milkman.

'You can take it — from me,' Caroline informed him. 'I'm not the sort to cast a slur on them 'oo are dead and gone and unable, in a manner o' speaking, to defend theirselves, and though the poor dear may 'ave 'ad a sharp tongue in the flesh, as well I know she 'ad to my cost, I'm sure I'm the last to bring it up against 'er

now, and though per'aps it's 'ardly becoming in me to say so, she thought a wonderful lot of even me, Mr. Gage. Why, almost the last words she uttered, before she left this 'ouse never to return, showed the trust she deposited in me. "Caroline'll take care of you," she sez to Miss Lavender. Those were 'er very words, and I 'eard 'er with my own ears. "Caroline'll take care of you," she sez.'

There was an impressive pause to allow Euphemia's last words to sink into the milkman's brain, then Caroline, with a preoccupied air, gazing over his shoulder at some distant object, remarked:

'I'm to drive down in 'Obbes, along with Miss Lavender.'

'Well, that'll be a nice treat for you,' said Mr. Gage.

'I'm not saying I ain't gratified in a way o' speaking,' acknowledged Mrs. Brill. 'But it 'ud 'ave seemed more like riding be'ind a corpse to 'ave 'ad plumes nodding in front of one, and silk scarves round the men's 'ats. I only 'ope 'Obbes

'ull 'ave the respeck not to send a driver in a cock-eyed 'at.'

'You can't expect the respect from a livery-stables as you get from an undertaker,' was the opinion of Mr. Gage, and Caroline agreed with him.

'It ain't in reason they should 'ave the good conduck of a funeral at their finger-tips, same as them whose lives are spent in the midst o' death,' she remarked concedingly.

The day of Euphemia's funeral was one of those rare ones which seem to have dropped straight out of heaven.

The blue sky was flecked with tiny, feathery white clouds, which floated on the light warm breeze like thistle-down, and the shower which had drenched the earth the previous night had brought out of it that clean, fresh scent of wet soil which only those who love the country can appreciate properly.

Everything seemed so full of the promise of life that it was hard to attune the mind to the thought of death.

The bonnet trimmed with black currants had, in accordance with Euphemia's wishes, been duly assigned to Caroline, who, by removing the strings and filling in the aperture at the back with a rusty black crêpe bow, had converted it into what she called a 'tock.' Taking time by the forelock, as a woman nearly always does when she has to go out in other than her everyday clothes, she appeared in it at lunch-time, causing Miss Lavender, who was in a state of nervous tension, to collapse into a fit of hysterical giggling which would not be suppressed.

Caroline stood in the doorway, a dish of potatoes in her hand, and the undescribable 'tock' on her head (from which a bunch of currants had detached itself and hung pendent from her back hair, making her look, for all the world, like a Bacchante who had seen better days), and surveyed Miss Lavender with open mouth. There was no doubt in her mind that her brain had given way under the shock.

'I'd better step down and ask Dr. Cruickshank to call in,' she said, advancing cautiously into the

room and sliding the potatoes on to the table at the opposite end to where Miss Lavender sat.

With a tremendous effort Miss Lavender recovered her composure, and sat up trying to look as if nothing unusual had occurred. She knew she had disgraced herself for ever in Caroline's eyes, but it was no use trying to explain how near akin laughter is to tears sometimes, and how, if one does not want to cry, one is bound to laugh on the flimsiest pretext.

'There is no need to trouble Dr. Cruickshank,' she said, carefully avoiding even a glance in Caroline's direction. 'And you need not wait,' she added, as the latter still hesitated in the doorway.

It is useless to deny that Mrs. Brill thoroughly enjoyed her drive to the church. She sat well forward, grasping a handkerchief with a deep black border in her hand with which she wiped away non-existent tears each time she noticed an acquaintance on the path. Her own cottage had been converted into a kind of miniature Grand Stand, in order that her neighbours might have

an opportunity of watching her triumphal progress, for though the blinds were vigorously drawn, various female figures could be observed wedged between them and the windows, while, in the garden, a row of infant Brills hung over the low wall in front, and one small boy, evidently confusing the issue of events, raised a shrill cheer, to be punched into silence by an elder sister.

Caroline did not say much during the drive, for which Miss Lavender was thankful. Once she remarked, with a faint suspicion of regret in her voice, that 'Mother 'ad men walking down each side of 'er coffin,' then, feeling perhaps that the speech savoured of fault-finding, hastened to add, 'But then, o' course, she was a double relic',' which she appeared to consider a satisfactory explanation.

It seemed an interminable distance to the church, and Miss Lavender, sitting back in her corner of the carriage, would have given anything to put her head out of the window and implore them to go a little faster, but to begin with, she had not the courage, and to go on with, she knew

that she would only shock the coachman, without doing any good.

By the time they reached the lich-gate her nerves were in such a state that she could have screamed aloud, and felt that it would have afforded her infinite pleasure to slap Caroline, who had commenced to sob convulsively the moment she caught sight of the knot of women assembled on the path, without whom no funeral can take place.

By what right did Caroline make such a to-do? *She* had not spent the best part of a lifetime with Euphemia. *She* had not stood side by side with the dead woman and watched the years slip by, girlhood merging into womanhood, womanhood retreating step by step before advancing old age. *She* was not the one left to grind at the mill alone, now that the other had been taken.

'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' The words dimly penetrated her brain, as she followed the bearers carrying their burden with slow heavy tread. Was that the answer to the riddle? Was it that that which men called Life was

nothing after all but the prelude to Life; that this world, which seemed so ridiculously important, was merely the womb of Eternity, and that the men and women who strutted about on it giving themselves airs were only children yet to be born?

'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' What was it Euphemia had said an hour or two before she died? 'Perhaps He foresaw you'd have need of me all these years.' If she could regard her long faithful service as a loan from God, to be repaid how and when He willed, Miss Lavender could too.

Suddenly it seemed as though the whole point of view shifted itself. She was no longer a poor atom of humanity yielding her inalienable rights to a pitiless God, but a debtor paying a fraction of what she owed to a long-suffering Creditor, and the thought steeled her to face the coming ordeal with courage.

Caroline, her handkerchief held tightly against her mouth in the manner prescribed by etiquette,

could not understand how it was that Miss Lavender watched the coffin lowered into the grave without the shedding of a single tear. Like so many people she was utterly unable to dissociate body from soul, and it was beyond her powers of comprehension to grasp the fact that it was no more Euphemia who lay at her feet than an old dress of hers would have been.

Miss Lavender turned to leave when the short, simple service was finished, strangely comforted and refreshed.

The future still loomed ahead, terrific in its loneliness, but she was no longer sorry as one without hope.

Some words she had once read came into her mind—'When God puts a burden upon us, He lays His hand underneath, so that the burden may not be too heavy for us to bear.'

God had laid a burden upon her. He would see that the load did not prove beyond her strength to carry.

CHAPTER XV

WHILE all these things were happening at Diddlebury, Bobbie, in London, was dancing a sorry attendance upon his lady-love.

One would certainly not have imagined, to look at him, that in three weeks he would be a happy bridegroom, and still less perhaps would one have regarded Marjorie as being within appreciable distance of sharing that happiness.

It is true that they were to be seen everywhere together, but that was only because, like Mary's lamb, everywhere that Marjorie went, Bobbie was sure to go; but it would be idle to say that he derived much pleasure or benefit from her society, for she was one of those people who can only enjoy themselves in a crowd, and even a visit to a theatre or music-hall resolved itself into a party of at least half a dozen, and, more often than not, meant for Bobbie a couple of hours' sullen boredom sitting at the end of a row of stalls with four or five people sandwiched

in between him and the one individual whose close proximity would have turned the most dreary entertainment into a pageant of pure delight.

Bobbie was not much given to self-analysis, or he might perhaps have laid his finger on the root of the matter and confessed that his discontent was grounded, not so much on the fact of being separated from the object of his affections as on the unpalatable truth (to which he deliberately shut his eyes lest he might be shocked at its nakedness) that he was not altogether indispensable to her happiness.

He might perhaps have felt less resentment if she had distributed the favours, which she withheld from him, a little more impartially, but instead she elected to single out one particular person upon whom to confer them, and that person a youth whom Bobbie loathed.

Moreover, Marjorie's predilection for the youth in question puzzled Bobbie, for he was the last man in whom one could imagine Marjorie taking any interest, and when Bobbie was puzzled

he was generally inclined to be a little fractious.

Lord Torpoint was the only son, indeed the only child, of his mother, and she, as she was fond of plaintively reminding him when he threatened to run counter to her wishes, was a widow.

Lady Torpoint had a large number of stock texts upon which she was accustomed to draw in times of stress, and found them particularly effective in clinching an argument, for nobody, unless a professing atheist, can refute a statement backed up by biblical authority, except by countering with an alternative text, and few are capable of that on the spur of the moment.

Lord Torpoint always reminded Bobbie of an owl driven out from its dark shelter into bright sunshine. He had a round vacuous face with a small but prominent nose, and blinked at the world through large tortoise shell-rimmed spectacles. He always seemed to be on the point of making some profound remark, but it never got any further than that, and for the most part he maintained a solemn silence.

Marjorie had only met him, for the first time, after her engagement to Bobbie had been publicly announced, and when she discovered that his income was at least double that which Bobbie would eventually possess (in what might quite possibly be a dim distant future), she felt she had been hardly dealt with by Fate. But Miss Chalmers was a young woman who, having made up her mind what she wanted, went straight for her objective, brushing aside any obstacles which stood between her and it with a ruthless determination that challenged Providence itself to intervene.

She was much too cool to trouble to deceive herself as to her own motives, and never attempted to gloss over with a veneer of false sentiment the reasons for which, in her opinion, matrimony had been ordained. She had not the shadow of a doubt that, in her case at any rate, it had been ordained for the help and comfort her husband might be to her in prosperity. Adversity never entered into her calculations at all. She was ready to have and to hold anybody for

richer — and the richer the better — but most certainly not for poorer.

Therefore she felt distinctly defrauded when Torpoint arrived upon the scene, and she realised that, were it not for her engagement to Bobbie, she might reasonably have expected to net him. However, she was not unduly hampered by scruples of conscience where her own interest was concerned, and she determined at all hazards to hold him in reserve 'in case.' The past was past, but the future hadn't yet come to pass, and often turned out differently to what had been planned, especially with a little extraneous help. At the same time, she was too worldly-wise to be off with the old love before she was on with the new. There must be no space between the two stools through which she might fall.

So she promptly proceeded to educate Lord Torpoint in the way in which she intended him to go, and had him well in hand before his mother, who had once met and thoroughly disliked Miss Chalmers, had sensed the danger,

and when, aroused to it, she had entered the lists, armed with an entirely new sheaf of texts suitable to the occasion, she was too late. Marjorie had quietly gone behind her back, and surreptitiously cut the apron strings to which her son had been tied since he was short-coated.

All his life long he had literally never left her side, for schools, both private and public, she looked upon as mere sinks of iniquity, and as for either of the Universities—well! Babylon in its latter days was a kindergarten compared to them. So poor Torpoint was dragged up by a series of incompetent but servile tutors, who patted him on the back in adulation when they should have done so in admonition, and he naturally grew to man's estate about as well fitted to go out and fight against the world, the flesh and the devil, as a chicken is to escape from the talons of a hawk. In Marjorie's skilful hands he was putty to be moulded at will (*her* will!), and she took very good care to see that she alone carried out her design. No outside busybody must be allowed to mar her handiwork.

Bobbie, though he was too honest himself to doubt Marjorie, nevertheless had an uneasy feeling that he was being made to look slightly ridiculous, and about this time one or two incidents occurred which led him to believe that the feeling was not confined to himself. Lady Torpoint, for instance, who watched her son's growing intimacy with Miss Chalmers in suspicious alarm, bore down upon him at a garden party at which they both happened to be (neither Marjorie nor Torpoint were present on this occasion), and having introduced herself to him, practically, though not in so many actual words, told him he was a fool, and, after firing off several texts, recited a verse or two from 'Locksley Hall,' which appeared to Bobbie to have no bearing on the situation, but seemed to afford the excited lady a certain amount of satisfaction, especially at that point where she spoke of somebody as a clown. Bobbie rather gathered she meant him, but was not certain. Anyhow she displayed considerable annoyance that Marjorie was not with him, demanded to know where her

son was, and when Bobbie informed her he had not the slightest idea, snorted in his face and stalked away, leaving him gasping for breath.

And when, later on, an earnest but indiscreet friend drew him into a quiet corner of the Club and hinted the same thing, though without the aid of texts or Tennyson, Bobbie for once lost his temper, cursed the earnest friend to his face as a tatler and busybody, loudly asseverated his entire belief and confidence in his fiancée, and inquired why the devil if he didn't mind the present situation anybody else should. The only fault *he* had to find with Marjorie was that she was a darned sight too good-natured, and allowed every twopenny-ha'penny whipper-snapper to take advantage of that fact. Torpoint bored her to idle tears. She had told him so, only she was sorry for him with that awful woman for a mother.

He left the earnest friend shaking an unconvinced head, and flung himself out of the Club in a fury, not appeased by the fact, which he refused to admit even to himself, that he *was* a fool

not to put his foot down and insist on Marjorie behaving herself in such a manner as not to make him look ridiculous. Not that his loyalty to her wavered for a single second. He clung tenaciously to his faith in her, only he hated that she should give other people the opportunity of criticism and fault-finding. Bobbie had arranged to meet Marjorie at Rumpelmayer's for tea on the afternoon following, and when she turned up with Torpoint in tow as usual, he for the first time, stirred up thereto by the two foregoing incidents, voiced his resentment.

'I can't think what on earth you see in that little owl,' he said with unaccustomed ferocity. 'What does he want here?'

Lord Torpoint was, at the moment, very slowly and deliberately choosing cakes at the counter, peering closely into each plate of them as if he expected to find a caterpillar lurking there.

Marjorie stared at Bobbie in cold disdain, and gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

'My dear Bobbie, you can't expect always to have me to yourself,' she remarked.

Bobbie laughed a little bitterly.

'Always!' he exclaimed. 'Do I ever nowadays? Why do you encourage that miserable little cur to be for ever trotting at your heels?'

'Please don't speak of my friends in that way,' she answered sharply. 'I invited Lord Torpoint to come.'

'And it was like his dam' cheek to accept,' was the thought in Bobbie's mind.

'Besides,' went on Marjorie frigidly, 'it's so out of date to be seen about everywhere alone with one's fiancé. Do try and remember we're not a chemist's assistant and his young woman.'

She deliberately picked out the words in order to be as offensive as she could. It was intended to be a sly hit at his father, but Bobbie never noticed. He was busy wishing with all his heart that he and Marjorie *were* in a stratum of society where honest love is considered no shame, and was thinking enviously of some of the couples he had seen in the parks, clasping hot hands in an ecstatic bliss which made speech superfluous. They, at any rate, were in the happy position of

being able to disregard the opinion of the outside world, if indeed the outside world had any existence for them, which, to judge by their indifference to the gaze of passers-by, it had not.

'People are talking,' he said doggedly.

'Are they?' said Marjorie indifferently. 'What about?'

'Of course I know the poor little blighter can't help admiring you,' he said quickly. 'All the same, darling, I'd give him a hint not to be always sitting in your pocket.'

A hard glint came into Marjorie's eyes. She didn't care a straw about public opinion, but she wasn't going to have her plans upset by busybodies. She glanced across at Torpoint hesitating uncertainly between a chocolate éclaire and a pink sugar cake, then back at Bobbie as though comparing them. She must get at the root of the matter.

'Who's been talking?' she asked abruptly.

'Well, old Lady Torpoint swooped down on me at the Altringhams' show yesterday——'

So it was to be a duel between her and Tor-

point's mother, was it? Well! The old lady was a formidable adversary, worthy of her steel, and appeared to have taken her measure pretty accurately. It would be wiser not to be off with the old love yet. In the short time left she might easily fail to bring her plans to fruition. It behoved her to walk warily.

'Don't you trust me, Bobbie?' she said reproachfully.

'Of course I do, darling,' said Bobbie, all contrition in a second. 'But you see, I know you, and other people don't, and I hate to hear you blackguarded for no reason. That's the only reason I said anything about it.'

And he really believed what he said.

Marjorie smiled a little contemptuously. How easy it was to whistle a man back to heel.

Bobbie, in repentant mood, was quite genial to Torpoint when he reappeared at the table with the cakes, and even, when they had finished tea, proposed his driving out to Richmond with them in Bobbie's car.

It was as they were getting into the car that

Lady Torpoint drove by. Bobbie was bending over the starting handle, so she only saw her son and Marjorie and, after one glare, ostentatiously lowered her parasol on that side.

Torpoint stopped dead with his foot on the step, perturbation written on every line of his countenance.

'I say! That was my mother!' he exclaimed in tones of alarm.

'Then she *doesn't* know you're out,' Marjorie said involuntarily, then laughed right into his agitated face.

Little beads of perspiration stood out on Torpoint's forehead. 'She'll be awfully angry,' he said despairingly.

'Why?' asked Marjorie sharply, with sudden change of front.

Lord Torpoint, looking the picture of misery, made no reply. He was no diplomat, and could do nothing except summon up a sickly grin, which she met with an icy stare.

'Perhaps you'd better go after her,' she said freezingly. 'Don't let me detain you.' She held

out a hand as she spoke. It was a daring experiment she was trying, but it meant she was several up on Lady Torpoint if it succeeded, and she was fairly sure of her ground, added to which there was always Bobbie to fall back upon in case of failure.

Torpoint wiped his heated brow, but otherwise made no movement. 'I shouldn't think of such a thing. I shouldn't *think* of it,' he said as determinedly as his state of mind would allow, and Marjorie permitted a little smile of triumph to hover on her lips. She'd scored a distinct victory over Lady Torpoint and made her own position very nearly impregnable, come what might.

'Let's go and see my wedding-dress,' she suggested. 'Is there time, Bobbie?'

'No, there isn't,' said Bobbie decidedly. He had no intention, if he could possibly prevent it, of letting Lord Torpoint see it before the wedding-day.

'Bother,' said Marjorie. 'I wanted Torry to see me in it.'

Lord Torpoint beamed on her adoringly. She had never called him 'Torry' before.

'Why can't we go to-morrow morning?' he proposed.

'No.' Bobbie almost shouted the monosyllable. 'It's—it's so damned unlucky to wear it before the day,' he concluded lamely as Marjorie stared at him in amazement.

'My dear Bobbie,' she said, 'you're as superstitious as any little servant girl. Perhaps you've looked up in Old Moore or Zadkiel, or whatever it is those people read, to see if the wedding-day's a lucky one.'

Bobbie coloured hotly. As a matter of fact he had come across a copy of Old Moore when he was down at Starr Cross, and glancing through it idly had, half in fun, turned to the date fixed for the wedding.

'You *have!* Torry, he *has!*' exclaimed Marjorie delightedly. 'Tell me the worst, Bobbie. Do!' She clasped her hands in mock entreaty.

'Oh, do shut up, Marjorie. I hate chaffing

about it,' Bobbie besought, but she paid no attention.

'I believe it's an unlucky day,' she declared. 'What *are* we to do about it? Torry! you don't seem to realise the tragedy going on under your very nose. Do do something, propose something, for goodness' sake.'

'I—I don't think I quite understand what you're driving at,' Torpoint said, blinking rapidly. He wasn't equal to these mental gymnastics, and was still ruminating over what he should say to his mother when he got home.

'Why! Bobbie's discovered the wedding-day is an unlucky one. Can't you think of anything to save us?'

'Be married the day before instead,' suggested Lord Torpoint with unaccustomed brilliancy.

Marjorie looked at him with a speculative air.

'Quite a good idea, Torry,' she said. 'I'll think it over.'

CHAPTER XVI

CAROLINE BRILL was one of those happily constituted people who labour under the delusion that without them the whole machinery of the world would fall to pieces.

The entire time she was with Miss Lavender she spent a great portion of it in wondering however Brill was managing without her, varied by moments in which her imagination boggled at the prospect of what was going to become of Miss Lavender when she finally returned home. Once the excitement of the funeral was over and she paled into comparative unimportance, her thoughts flew homewards to her deserted husband and children with a commiseration quite uncalled for. Brill was having an exceedingly good time of it in his capacity of grass-widower. His eldest daughter at the age of fourteen was a far better housekeeper than his feckless wife, and had the additional merit of retiring to bed

long before closing time, which saved all possibility of the recriminations and reproaches which greeted him on his return home under Mrs. Brill's régime. It was certainly annoying to be told that he was 'no better than a beast of the field,' just after he had been expounding the superiority of the working-man over the dissolute race of peers, and on the top of boasting that it was he and his like who were the main supports of the British Empire, it was humiliating to be reminded that, so far from that being the case, he was not even capable of supporting his own family properly.

Caroline, imbued with this sense of her own importance, had determined that she must not announce her impending departure too suddenly. News of that sort wanted to be broken gently!

She therefore seized the opportunity of Miss Lavender being in the kitchen for the purpose of ordering dinner to prepare her mind for the reception of the impending calamity.

'You may give me a little Irish stew for lunch, Caroline,' said Miss Lavender. 'I think there

was some mutton left from that neck, wasn't there ? '

' Yes, miss, Irish stew,' repeated Caroline, a far-away look in her eyes. 'Brill's very fond of stew,' she added inconsequently.

' Is he really ? ' said Miss Lavender, feeling rather as if it was a hint that Brill should be invited to partake of it.

' Ah, that 'e is,' Caroline remarked with fervour. ' 'E'll not be getting it now like I give it 'im. Elsie's a good gal but not up to a stew yet.'

' I don't fancy it is very difficult to make, is it ? '

' It 'as its secrets like all other dishes. It's the pertaters more than the meat as counts in the cooking, though you can't get a gal to see it.'

' Very well then. Lunch—Irish stew,' said Miss Lavender in tones of finality, not in the least wishing for a dissertation on the correct way of making it. 'Now what about pudding ? ' she asked.

' Semmerlina ? ' suggested Carolina with a fine air of originality.

'Ye-es. I don't care much for it, but still——'

'The 'ouse 'll be more like a pigsty than a 'uman 'abitation,' remarked Caroline, pursuing some train of thought of her own. 'Men are 'elpless creatures when let alone. If it ain't a button off it's a tear in the trousers to be mended, and all took as a matter o' course, and no thanks for it. You 'aven't lost much, miss, by not being 'ustled into the 'oly state. Once bit, twice shy! That's my motter, and when the blessed release comes I shall know better than to be took in a second time, if so invited. Meantime, 'aving 'ad a burden put upon me, it ain't my place to rebel. Duty's duty, call it whatever other name you will, and I ain't the one to shirk mine. I'm sure it 'as been a pleasure to be with you, miss, at this melancholy time, but all things come to an end, and I'm afraid I shall 'ave to leave you this day week.' She stopped quite out of breath, and Miss Lavender gasped in sympathy.

'Of course, Caroline,' she said. 'Perhaps you would like to go immediately. I can quite under-

stand your desire to get back to your husband and children. I've no doubt I can manage.'

Caroline sniffed aggrievedly. This calm acquiescence in her departure was not at all what she had bargained for. She had pictured to herself Miss Lavender begging her, with tears in her eyes, to reconsider her decision and not to desert her in such a hurry, and she had been prepared, after due and impressive deliberation, graciously to accede to the request, but this unruffled acceptance of her announcement completely took the wind out of her sails, and she began hurriedly to recant.

'Not but what Elsie does very nicely for 'er father,' she observed. 'And it's good practice for 'er in case I'm taken first, as there's never no knowing but what I may, death being promiscuous in its 'abits, and not to be depended upon, and Brill 'aving always discomfited me from the start. So, miss, since it's to oblige you, and for the sake of the poor dear 'oo's gone, I won't be the one to leave you in the lurch, not for twenty Brills I won't, so make your mind easy.'

'Oh, but it's quite all right, Caroline, really,' Miss Lavender assured her hastily. 'You see, Mr. Tidd has very kindly invited me to pay a visit to Starr Cross whenever I like, and so I've only to send a note round to say I'm coming. I'll arrange to go there the day after to-morrow; that will set you free to return home.'

Caroline grunted.

'And 'oo's to see to the 'ouse while you're away ?' she asked.

'Oh, don't you think it will be safe to lock it up and leave it, if I take the spoons and teapot with me ?' Miss Lavender said, a little daunted by this aspect of the case which now presented itself to her for the first time.

'Maybe it will, but then again maybe it won't,' hazarded Caroline. 'One 'ears of such tales that I should never be surprised at what 'appened. Only last Tuesday week I was reading in Brill's Sunday newspaper 'ow burglars 'ad driven up, as bold as brass, to an 'ouse at 'Ackney when the owner of it was away on 'is 'oliday, and 'ad carted off every stick of furni-

ture under the noses of the neighbours, and when the poor gentleman come back there wasn't a bed to sleep in, much less a saucepan to cook the dinner in; which reminds me—'ad we fixed on the semmerlina once and for all ? '

' Yes, I think so; and for dinner——'

' The daring of it, when you come to think! If they'd left a gal in the 'ouse it could never 'ave 'appened, but there it was, you see! The 'ouse being empty the burglars was able to work at their leisure. Not that I 'old with leaving gals alone in an empty 'ouse; and to go on with, empty it would not be in such a case.'

' It is extremely unlikely that anybody would risk breaking in and stealing my furniture even if I did leave the house without a single person in it. No. That will be the best plan, for me to move to Starr Cross the day after to-morrow, and while I'm there I can be looking out for a maid.' Miss Lavender gave a little sigh as she spoke. She knew it was absurd, but she hated the idea of a stranger in Euphemia's place.

' I'd be sorry to be at the mercy of one o' the

gals one sees nowadays,' said Caroline with gloomy foreboding. 'Their words are softer than butter, 'aving war in their 'earts, or if it ain't war it's followers. Look at that Eliza of Bowerses! I see 'er go past 'ere Sunday afternoon with the young feller 'oo mends bicycle punkahs in that little shed that looks like a second-'and fowl 'ouse on the road to Frippon, talking and laughing as free and easy as if she was walking out with 'im instead of 'olding 'im in reserve, like, in case 'er young man in London thinks better of 'er.'

'I have not the slightest intention of engaging that sort of a girl,' said Miss Lavender a trifle stiffly.

'They're all tarred with the same feather these days,' Caroline observed. "You can't 'elp yourself, and would you mind settling what you'll 'ave for your dinner, miss, then I'll know where I'm standing.'

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. JARVIS was a tall angular lady with a long angular face, which looked even longer and narrower than nature had intended it to be by reason of the dangling jet ear-rings which she affected. She had rather coarse browny-gray hair strained tightly back from her forehead, and done on the top of her head in a small hard knot so exactly like a drawer handle that it was difficult to believe you were not meant to pull it. She had somewhat prominent teeth, and a short upper lip, and she had a habit of making noble but ineffectual efforts to conceal the former with the latter, a habit which, taken in conjunction with the shape of her face, gave her an extraordinary resemblance to a horse with an ill-fitting bit.

She was everlastingly engaged upon some intricate piece of knitting or other which involved her in abstruse calculations, and which pro-

gressed at about the same rate as the historic shroud worked by Penelope, for she was constantly going back upon her tracks and unravelling yards of wool from whatever garment she happened to be making, and hours of industrious labour were rendered abortive in a few minutes, though it never seemed to discourage her.

Miss Lavender did not find her exactly an enlivening companion, but she at any rate satisfied the proprieties, and effectually did away with any qualms which might have been felt as to the acceptance of Mr. Tidd's hospitality. And if small-talk flagged, as it too often did, there were always patterns for babies' vests to fall back upon, and 'purls' and 'plains' were as thick in the conversation as bullets on the field of battle, until at the end of a fortnight Miss Lavender felt as though the very flowers in the garden were made of wool, having reached that stage of obsession when even her sleep was disturbed by frantic endeavours to work out impossible designs.

It was the night before Bobbie's wedding-day.

Mr. Tidd had steadily refused to take part in the family dinner to which he had been invited, and was merely going up for the day itself, returning immediately after the reception.

The sun had set more than an hour ago, but through the belt of trees which skirted the lawn on the left a warm glow still lingered in the western sky, shading off gradually into the deep purple of the summer night, out of which, like some great jewel, shone the evening star, rivalling in its clear cold light the crescent moon which already was dipping down behind the shrubbery. It was so still in the garden that the very flowers seemed to be asleep, and though a faint breeze rustled the tree-tops it was so soft and gentle that one might almost imagine it to be the kiss of a mother upon the forehead of a slumbering child who just stirs under her embrace without waking.

The only sound which broke the absolute silence was the steady click of the needles with which Mrs. Jarvis was knitting what she called 'my guild garment' with feverish energy. She

sat bolt upright on a high-back chair and never stopped working for a single instant, except at intervals to count her stitches, and even that she appeared to think a waste of time judging by the hurried manner in which she polished them off three at a go with her thumb nail.

The other two who sat with her showed no inclination to talk. Perhaps the thoughts which filled the mind of each were too delicate to bear the weight of words, for both were thinking of the future and of what lay beyond.

Miss Lavender had determined to make the final plunge and bring her visit to an end the following day, though she had not as yet told her host of her decision, for she dreaded argument on the subject. She needed every scrap of courage she possessed to force herself back to the path of loneliness awaiting her, and she was too well aware of her infirmity of purpose to dare risk persuasion. When Mr. Tidd returned the following evening he would find her gone.

So they sat, not trusting themselves to speak, drinking in the quiet beauty of the night which

seems so full of peace, and yet is able to arouse such fierce longings in the breast for we know not what!

The glow in the western sky died away; one by one the stars came out to join their herald brother; the tree-tops were lost against the darkening heavens, save where the moon, now beginning to set, threw them into relief. A distant church clock struck ten with slow, booming notes.

'Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four,' chanted Mrs. Jarvis solemnly, then, digging a temporarily disengaged needle through her knitting, she stuffed it into a work-bag, and rose to her feet.

'There's ten,' she observed.

Miss Lavender, seeing what was expected of her, rose also, though reluctant to end the day and so draw a little nearer to an unwished-for morrow, yet having no alternative but to obey the indirect order to retire, since Mrs. Jarvis was, in a manner of speaking, her hostess.

'You don't want to go to bed?' The half-

question, half-statement of fact, came from Mr. Tidd, and at it Miss Lavender hesitated, torn between a keen desire to eke out the evening and a fear lest she might appear forward if she remained.

It was Mrs. Jarvis who finally clinched the matter.

'Then I'll say good-night,' she said in tones which clearly intimated that, though perfectly aware that it was none of her business, she nevertheless disapproved, and gathering up her impedimenta she took her departure bedwards, leaving Miss Lavender with a delightful sense of having, for once in her life, snapped her fingers in the face of Mrs. Grundy.

A footman entered the drawing-room and, after shutting the windows, drew down the blinds and extinguished the lights, but from the study window a little further along the terrace a lamp threw its beams out into the garden, making a patch of bright yellow on the lawn. Otherwise it was almost pitch dark, for the moon had quite disappeared by now.

Mr. Tidd helped himself to a cigar from a box which stood on a wicker table at his elbow, and striking a match lit it.

'I'll be gone before you're down in the morning,' he said, holding the match out at arm's-length, and watching it slowly flicker out.

'You should have gone to-day. You'll be so tired,' said Miss Lavender sympathetically.

He chucked the spent match on to the lawn below the terrace with a jerk of the wrist.

'I expect I shall be tired; I expect I shall,' he said heavily. 'I'll be glad to be 'ome again, and have it over and done with. But you'll be 'ere when I get back,' he added a little more cheerfully.

'I—I'm not sure,' said Miss Lavender flurriedly, glad of the prevailing darkness. 'I—I think I ought to be getting back home to-morrow.'

'You ain't going ? ' Mr. Tidd said blankly.

'I—I can't stop here for ever,' Miss Lavender replied desperately.

'Why can't you ? ' asked Mr. Tidd, with such

sudden fierceness that Miss Lavender fairly jumped.

'What—what an absurd question to ask,' she said, beginning to wish most heartily that she had kept her presence of mind sufficiently to refrain from breaking the news to him of her intention to bring her visit to a close.

'Is it so absurd?'

She heard his chair creak, and felt, rather than saw, that he was leaning towards her. His hand sought hers in the darkness and, when it had found what it wanted, rested there for a minute or two.

'My dear,' he said earnestly, 'we're two lonely old bodies left to fend for ourselves. Both of us have been called upon to give up the one we loved, and in both our lives there's an ugly gap. Why should it be absurd if we try to fill up those gaps? Are you afraid that people will laugh at us? Why should they? Why should anybody wonder if we shrink from going down into the valley of shadows solitary and alone? There was a line of poetry I read once, and a line of it keeps

on running through my brain all the time: "In lonely places, thou art crowds to me." That's 'ow it went, I remember. "In lonely places, thou art crowds to me." My dear, we've both got plenty o' lonely places in our lives. Why shouldn't we try and fill 'em with one another? I'm just a common old man, and you are a lady, miles above me, but if you'd consent to marry me you'd make me very happy, and I'd do my best not to disgrace you.'

Miss Lavender had managed to free her hand from his clasp long before he had finished speaking, but there were tears in her eyes when he stopped, and a curious feeling of triumph in her breast—not the triumph of conquest, but a sweeter, saner triumph arising from the knowledge that, whatever might be the upshot of this momentous hour, nothing could ever take away from her the consciousness of the fact that there was one person in the world who wanted her.

It was only for a brief second that this triumphant feeling lasted; it was succeeded the next by a totally different one. It was pity, not affec-

tion which prompted this offer of marriage—a sudden, overwhelming pity for her forlorn condition. What else could it be? She had nothing to recommend her in the way of cleverness, or beauty, or wealth; what then remained but compassion to account for this unexpected proposal? But for her gauche remark about not being able to stop for ever, the idea would never have entered his head. A hot blush dyed her cheeks crimson at the recollection of it. Perhaps he had read a false meaning into it, and fancied she had been leading up to this!

'I don't think you realise what you're saying,' she managed to blurt out. 'You forget I'm an old woman.'

'I know well enough what I'm saying,' he replied in clear even tones. 'If you imagine I've acted on the spur of the moment you've made a big mistake. Now look here, my dear. Pretty nearly the whole of my life I've had to calculate ahead. I've taught myself to weigh the future in the balance of my own two hands, and I've learned that one can't afford to put mere senti-

ment into the scales, so don't run away with the notion that this is a sudden thought which has come into my 'ead. I won't deny I've spoken a bit sooner than I intended, but that's neither 'ere nor there. It was just selfishness made me do it. I wanted so badly to 'ave the *right* to turn to you for comfort when I got back to-morrow, but I see now as I was wrong. I ought to have waited a bit. Don't be in a hurry to give me an answer. Take time to think it over. Take a week, or a month, if you like, and then, if you feel you can, give me the answer I want and make me very proud.'

'You're asking me out of pity,' Miss Lavender said, the tears overflowing and running down her cheeks.

'Am I?' he said. 'Perhaps I am, but if so it's pity for myself.'

CHAPTER XVIII

Miss Lavender sat by the open window of her bedroom trying to collect her thoughts and restore them to some semblance of order from the chaos into which they had been thrown by the amazing scene through which she had just passed.

To say that she had been surprised by the proposal of marriage which she had received was to put it mildly! She was fifty-eight years old and nobody had ever wanted to marry her before, and that anybody should now, made her feel as if some elaborate practical joke was being played upon her. Marriage belonged to youth and love, and she was an old woman. Love had turned his face away from her when she was young. Was it likely he would recognize her now that she was young no longer?

Her first sensation had been one of incredulous dismay, but dismay had quickly given place to a kind of half-hearted resentment.

She was only being asked out of pity! If there had been anything lovable in her she would not have had to wait all these years without somebody discovering it. Was she so poor-spirited a creature that she was to submit to being given a home like any starving dog out of the gutter? Yet what had been his answer when she had taxed him with that very reason for asking her to be his wife?

'You're asking me out of pity,' she had cried.

'Perhaps I am, but if so it's pity for myself.'

If he had spoken the truth when he said that, why should her own foolish pride be brought to bear upon the matter at all? She was the grantor of pity, not the recipient of it. It rested with her to grant or to withhold.

'Pity for myself.'

Those had been his actual words, and, at the remembrance of them, a sudden wave of tender longing swept over her.

There is not a woman who does not, deep down in the bottom of her heart, look upon man as a species of child to be spoilt or scolded,

cosseted or slapped, according to the mood of the moment, and—at all times—requiring to have his buttons sewn on for him! So it was with Miss Lavender. In one blinding flash of light it was borne upon her that here was an opportunity offered such as would never occur again, and that if she refused it there would not be a single moment in her life in which she would not bitterly regret it, and with the knowledge came a strange sense of well-being. It was as if she had been battling with a heavy sea, striving to reach the shore and being slowly but surely carried further and further away, and just as she was at her last gasp and about to give up hope, realising that a rope had been thrown to her and that she was being drawn in to safety.

How sweet it would be to feel that there was one whose name she had the right to bear, whose arm would be always ready for her to lean upon when the way was rough and stony, to whom she might look for help and counsel in perplexities, and who, in his turn—the thought was there in

the back of her mind though she did not give it definite expression—would look to her to perform all those duties which seem so trivial, but which a man is so helpless over—even to the sewing on of buttons! In the first agitation of the proposal she had refused to give a decided answer, for she had been too confused to weigh the question properly. Now that she had had time to think it over she wondered why she had ever hesitated, it seemed so obvious that there was but one course for her to pursue. She could almost fancy that her whole life had been leading up to this hour.

She had hesitated but she would hesitate no longer. She had made up her mind and there should be no more foolish shilly-shallying. He should have his answer before he left for London the next morning.

Crossing over to the writing-table she lit a candle and, sitting down, took a sheet of paper from the case in front of her.

It was some time before she could concoct a letter which met the requirements of the situa-

tion, and she made two or three false starts, but at last she just wrote these words, the line which he had quoted to her only an hour ago, 'In lonely places, thou art crowds to me.' That was all, except that at the bottom she signed her name. She knew that he would understand without anything further, and a proper letter was beyond her powers.

Slipping it into an envelope she fastened and directed it, then propped it up on the mantelpiece against a vase of flowers. She could send it in the morning by one of the maids, before he left the house.

That he was still downstairs in his study she knew, for she could see the light of his lamp streaming out on to the lawn, and if she leaned out of her window she could hear his pen scratching on the paper and smell the scent of his cigar, but she had not the courage to go down to him. Although she had written the words which bound her to him, her old-maidish prejudices forbade the impropriety of a personal interview with him in his study at half-past eleven at night, when

the rest of the household had long ago retired to bed.

Carrying the lighted candle to the dressing-table she went to the window to pull down the blind preparatory to undressing, but before she did so she leaned out to listen once more to the sound of his pen travelling rapidly over the paper, and catch a whiff of the aroma of his cigar. It seemed to speak of comfort and companionship, and gave her a pleasing foretaste of the future.

She was just about to withdraw her head when her ears caught another sound, that of the gravel crunching on the drive beneath the weight of an unmistakable footstep.

Instantly her thoughts flew to a diamond necklace which Mr. Tidd had been showing her only that afternoon, and which she knew was locked up in the safe in the study where he was sitting at this very moment with the window open on to the terrace. It was intended for to-morrow's bride, but he had refused to send it, and meant to take it up to town with him when

he travelled thither the next morning. What more likely than that some thief had heard of it, and was coming to get possession of the valuable piece of jewellery! If that was the case, he would probably not stick at any means by which he might secure it. Hastily she blew out the candle and stood at the window, her heart beating to suffocation, uncertain how to act. She listened intently, peering out into the darkness, and was beginning to think she must have made a mistake after all, when her eyes, growing accustomed to the gloom, detected the figure of a man crossing the lawn towards the house. Before she had time to call out or raise any alarm, the figure advanced into the ring of light which shone from the study window, and she saw with relief, not unmixed with surprise, that it was Bobbie, but a Bobbie so changed that she could scarcely restrain from exclaiming aloud. He walked with slow heavy steps and his shoulders were bent and bowed like those of an old, old man, while his face was so white and set that but for the bright staring eyes it might have belonged

to a corpse. What could he be doing here, slinking up to his father's house like a thief in the night, when in less than twenty-four hours he was to be married?

As if it were almost too much of an effort for him, he stepped up on to the low terrace which was raised a couple of feet from the level of the lawn and made his way across to the open window immediately below.

'Father,' she heard him say in dull expressionless tones, then there was the sound of a chair being pushed sharply back and Mr. Tidd's voice exclaiming in astonishment:

'Bobbie! Why, what are you doing here?'

Miss Lavender leaned out of the window until she was in imminent danger of falling headlong. It was perfectly easy to hear every word spoken in the room below, and it was not till long afterwards that she realised with a blush of shame that she had been guilty of deliberate eavesdropping. At the moment the frantic desire to know what had happened and what Bobbie was doing here at such an hour the very night before

his wedding outweighed every other consideration.

She saw Bobbie lurch into the room and heard him say in the same even monotonous tones, 'I've come home.'

'You're ill!' The staccato note of anxiety reached her where she stood.

'No, I'm not ill, only tired. I—I shall be all right in the morning.'

'I don't understand. What has happened? Why are you not in London? Have you forgotten that to-morrow's your wedding-day?'

'My wedding-day! Ha-ha-ha-ha-*ha!* That's awfully funny. My wedding-day! Ha-ha-ha-ha-*ha!*' Each time he laughed it ended in a kind of high falsetto scream, and from the sound she could tell that he was not far off a fit of hysterics, and evidently his father thought the same, for he bade him quite sharply to be quiet, and she heard the clink of a glass as if something was being poured out, then Mr. Tidd's voice saying:

'Drink this and pull yourself together. All right, boy, I'll 'old it for you. Now then. What's up?'

'She—Marjorie——'

'Well?'

'She's gone.'

'Gone! Gone where?'

'What's it matter where? She's gone. That's all that matters.'

'D'you mean she's run away?' Apparently Bobbie nodded, for the next thing Miss Lavender heard was Mr. Tidd's voice again, saying:

'Did she—was there—someone else?'

'Yes. There was. Damn him, damn him, *damn* him!'

'Who?'

'A man called Torpoint. A worm who's been crawling after her for the last two months. A thing who's not worthy to—to breathe the same air as her. My God! If I could only get hold of him I'd slash his poisonous carcase to ribbons, and I will too, I will.'

It was not a pretty speech, but he was not in a pretty mood. There is very little to choose between the most highly civilised man and a savage, in a quarrel which concerns a woman.

Even Miss Lavender, though she shuddered at the naked brutality of it, recognised that here lay something beyond her powers of comprehension, something which she instinctively shrank from but dared not condemn because behind it all was the impulsion of nature itself.

'Are they—married?' the question came hesitatingly.

'This morning. I—I didn't get her note till five o'clock though. She was careful not to let me know till they were safely out of the way. That shows she knew what I should do.'

'You came to me at once?' There was an exultant ring of gladness in the demand.

'Why, of course! There was no one else to go to. Don't you—want me?'

'Want you! There's not been a minute since you went away that I've not wanted you.' No faithful lover greeting his mistress could have put more longing into the simple words, and they proved apparently too much for the wounded soul of the boy who had been so cruelly used, because the next second there rose a

sound which Miss Lavender had never heard before and which she prayed she might never hear again, the sound of a man crying as if his heart would break, and there are not many worse things than that to hear in the world, for a man does not give way to tears unless he is pretty far along the road to despair, and then not in front of another man if he can help it, even though it be his own father. Each heaving sob seemed like a physical blow striking her in the face and, though she was not conscious of it, two big tears forced their way from her eyes and rolled unheeded down her cheeks, in silent sympathy with a suffering she was powerless to relieve.

For a while she could hear nothing but that uncontrollable storm of weeping, but gradually the sobs grew less, until they finally died away altogether and she was able to distinguish once more what was being said. It was the older man who was speaking.

'We'll go back, shall we?' he was saying. 'We'll go back and try and make everything as it used to be.'

'One can't go back. Nothing can ever be the same as—as it used to be.'

'Can't it, Bobbie, can't it? Won't you try? I—I've been very lonely since you went away. You—you mean a lot to me, Bobbie. Let's try and go back to the old days, shall we?'

'I'll — I'll try, then. You're good to me, Father. I—I've thought a lot of you too while I've been—away. I—I've felt a bit lonely too, just lately.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I—I couldn't very well, and besides——'

'Besides what?'

'I—I thought things would be better after we—you know.'

'We'll talk things over in the morning. You'll be glad to get to bed.'

'I couldn't sleep. I think—if you won't think me awfully silly—I'd like to go for a long walk. I feel as if I want to be moving. I—I couldn't stop still.'

'I understand, boy.'

'You won't sit up for me, will you? I daresay I shan't be back till breakfast time.'

'You—you *are* coming back?' There was a new shade of anxiety in the old man's voice.

'Why, of course I am. And, Father——'

'My boy?'

'You've been the best pal a chap could wish for. I—I've been rather a beast lately. I didn't mean to be.'

'That's all right, my boy.'

'And, Father——'

'Well?'

'You—you shan't ever be lonely again, if I can help it.'

'God bless you, boy. I'll leave this window unfastened in case you want to come in early.'

Miss Lavender saw Bobbie's figure step out on to the terrace and disappear once more into the darkness, then the light in the study was extinguished, and a few minutes later a heavy tread passing her door told her that Mr. Tidd was on his way to bed, but she remained where she was without stirring, trying to recall as much as she could of the conversation she had recently overheard and dovetail it in with what had taken place previously.

One sentence particularly stood out from among the rest with startling vividness.

'You shan't ever be lonely again,' Bobbie had said, and it was the recollection of these words which filled Miss Lavender with searchings of heart.

Was not that the reason why Mr. Tidd had asked her to be his wife—that she might fill the lonely places? And if they were already filled, what excuse had she for accepting him? Clearly none! If she became his wife, she would be deliberately putting herself into a false position, ensuring her own future at the expense of another. So her conscience told her, but all the same she was sorely tempted. It would be so easy to let things take their natural course. She had only to carry out her original intention and send the note she had written by the maid who called her in the morning, and no one need ever know that she had even been aware of the altered circumstances of the case. Was she, who had been offered bread, to thrust it aside and content herself with a stone in order that another's

hunger might be appeased? Had she no rights to contend for?

So she tried to argue with herself, but in her heart of hearts she knew that there was but one answer to all these questions she asked herself. The verdict was given against her, and there could be no appeal.

The first streaks of daylight were brightening the eastern sky before she moved from the spot where she had crouched by the open window, and her limbs were stiff and cramped. She undressed and got into bed, but sleep did not visit her weary eyelids. All through what remained of the night she tossed and turned, first this side then that, peering out into the future and seeing nothing there but the menacing spectre of utter loneliness, a loneliness more terrific now than it had been before, because of that brief respite which had been granted her.

When at last, after what seemed hours, the clock on the stairs struck six, she felt she could lie there and think no longer. She understood now what Bobbie had meant when he said he

wanted to be moving. An insatiable longing to get out into the cool fresh air, away from the four stifling walls which closed her in, seized upon her. She would go out just for half an hour, and be back before the household was stirring.

She huddled on her clothes anyhow, dressing almost mechanically, for her brain felt heavy and stupid, and her head ached so badly that she could hardly see out of her eyes. Perhaps that was the reason why she failed to notice a small square white envelope directed to Mr. Tidd, propped against one of the vases on the mantelpiece, or perhaps her senses were so numbed and dulled that the sight of it conveyed no meaning to her mind. It may even have been that she had forgotten she had ever written it, for last night seemed a hundred years ago, and her memories of it were dim and confused. She stole out of the room and downstairs, and on the mantelpiece stood the note untouched, unheeded.

She made her way out through the study window, which was still unshuttered and un-

fastened, as it had been left the night before

A soft breeze fanned her feverish cheeks as she hurried down the drive, anxious to get out of view of the house as quickly as possible, and everything had that appearance of having just been furbished up which is only to be seen by those who take the trouble to rise early on a fine morning in June.

She turned her footsteps in the direction of the Heath when she reached the corner of the lane, knowing that there she would be safe from prying eyes, and presently found herself ankle-deep in the dew-brushed heather, with the already busy bees darting from flower to flower in search of honey, while on every side could be heard that low hum which can hardly be described as a sound, but is more a vibration of the air, as when a chord is struck on the piano with the loud pedal down so that it gradually dies away into nothingness.

In the middle of the open space stood a small clump of silver birches on a sloping ridge of ground, and thither Miss Lavender betook her-

self. Arrived there, she seated herself on the bank, leaning her back against a convenient trunk, too weary to go further.

For a while she sat there, the same thoughts that had tormented her all night still revolving round and round in her tired brain, but by degrees the peace and beauty of the quiet spot acted as a healing lotion—her limbs relaxed their tension; her eyes closed; she slept.

It was two hours later that she woke with a start, and gazed around her wonderingly. For a second or so she could not imagine where she was, but recollection quickly came to her. She hurriedly pulled out her watch and looked to see what the time was, then uttered an exclamation of dismay. She must hasten back if her absence was to pass unobserved, though in any case the maid must know who had been to her room to call her. She got back to the house without meeting any one until she reached her own door, but there she ran across the housemaid, who looked at her curiously.

'It was such a lovely morning,' Miss Lavender said apologetically.

'Yes, miss,' returned the woman dutifully. 'I gave your note to the master.'

'Wh-what note?' asked Miss Lavender faintly, clutching at the handle of the door for support.

'The one you left on your mantelpiece, miss,' answered the maid, unable to keep the surprise she felt out of her voice. 'Didn't you mean me to?'

'It's—it's all right, thank you,' replied Miss Lavender, falling rather than walking into her room.

Once safely in there, with the door locked behind her, she sat down on the nearest chair and gave way to despair.

Here was an anticlimax in very truth! What imp of mischief had caused her to overlook that fatal letter! Why had she not destroyed it the very moment she had altered her decision? She tried to excuse herself on the plea that Bobbie's dramatic return had driven all recollection of it out of her head, she tried to be philosophic and tell herself that it was done now and could not

be undone, but neither excuse nor philosophy altered the dreadful fact that her letter was in Mr. Tidd's possession.

There was obviously but one thing to be done. She must go boldly to him and tell him she had changed her mind. No other course lay open to her.

The gong rang for breakfast, and she went downstairs with faltering feet and a heart sick with dread.

He was alone in the dining-room when she walked in, and at sight of her he came forward with hands outstretched and a smile on his face.

Poor Miss Lavender! She was evidently not born to be an intrigante, for she entirely forgot to express her surprise at seeing him there instead of in the train on his way to London, but the omission passed unnoticed. He supposed she had been told of Bobbie's misfortune by one of the servants.

'I got your note,' he said.

'No, no. It's a mistake,' she said, putting out her hands as though to ward him off.

The smile died away from his lips.

'A mistake,' he repeated stupidly. 'Do you mean you didn't write this?' He pulled her note out of his pocket, and held it out for her to see.

'Yes, I wrote it, but — it's a mistake,' she reiterated dully.

'You mean — you've altered your mind?'

She nodded, afraid to trust herself to speak.

'Why?'

The question rang out sharply and peremptorily.

'Oh, be kind to me,' she cried. 'I'm worn out with thinking.'

'Why?' he asked again, this time more gently. 'I've the right to know.'

'You know without my telling you,' she burst out. 'You've no right to question me like this.'

'No right! No right, when it concerns me so vitally! I've all the right in the world. Come, my dear, be honest with me. It means so much to me.'

'It means *nothing* to you. It's you who've altered since I wrote that, not I. You only

wanted me to fill the lonely places, and now there won't be any. You've got Bobbie back. You don't need me as well,' she sobbed, throwing pride and discretion and everything else to the winds, and blurting out the truth, which she had fully intended should never pass her lips, in the agitation of the moment.

The smile came back to his lips, but now there was as much tenderness as gladness about it.

'So that's all it is, is it?' he said. 'You think there won't be any more lonely places! As if a man ain't *always* lonely without the one woman in the world, just as a woman is without the one man. My dear, you can't look deep down into my heart, but look into my face and tell me what you see there.'

He drew her to him, and almost as though his will forced hers to bend to it, she lifted her eyes to his and, reading in them the message from his soul, knew for a blessed certainty that there were still lonely places which she might fill.

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